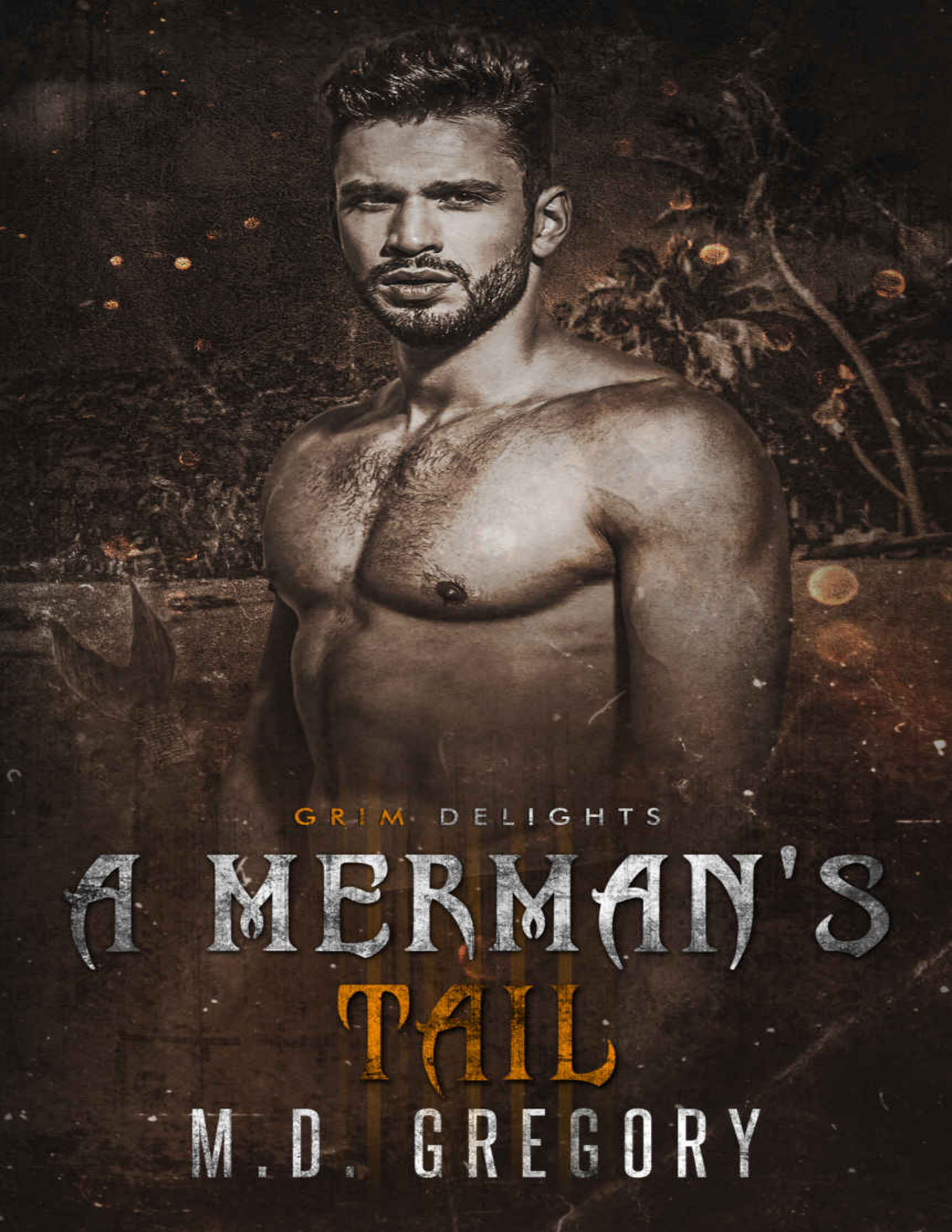
GRIM DELIGHTS
A MERMAN'S
TAIL
M.D. GREGORY

A MERMAN'S TALE

Grim and Sinister Delights #14

MEG BAWDEN

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Thank you
The Grim And Sinister Delights Series

CREDITS OR IT TAKES A TEAM TO RAISE A BOOK

Editing by Kiyle Brosius
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WARNING

These books are for adult readers who enjoy stories where the lines between right and wrong are blurred. High heat, twisted and tantalizing, these are not for the faint of heart.

BLURB

LYRIC WAITS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS TO RISE TO THE WATER'S SURFACE WITH HIS FATHER'S PERMISSION.

When he finally breaches the ocean, he unexpectedly sees a most breathtaking human. A rogue wave destroys the human's boat, and Lyric saves him, taking him to land. Since that fateful day, Lyric longs to find his human once more. He is even prepared to make a great sacrifice to finally meet him again.

Ethan Turmont comes from a family of fantasy hunters, or at least that's what the locals call them. His father has always been adamant that mermaids exist, and he has searched the ocean for years, looking for the mythical creature that made them the laughing stock of their town. A night out in the boat leaves Ethan fatherless after a storm, but it makes him as determined as his father once was to solve the oceanic mystery. He *knows* a merman saved his life, once upon a time, even if his friends think he's gone as crazy as his father.

When Ethan meets a voiceless man, there's something familiar about him, and he's more beautiful than any woman Ethan has admired. He's never been attracted to a man before. Between his newfound desire for someone of the same gender, and his obsession with finding the merman who saved his life—so he can take his tail as proof—Ethan has a new view on life.

Grim and Sinister Delights is a dark romance series based on classic fairy tales and stories. You will find standalone tales of gay romance that range in darkness and kinks. If you dare to take the challenge, read them all to find yourself lost in a classic that you think you know. These stories are for adult readers and may contain morally ambiguous themes.

CHAPTER ONE

Lyric

Today I realized the beautiful shade of red that blood shone under the sunlight, almost sparkling like the treasure that lay beneath the ocean in the destroyed human boats near my old home. The liquid flowed darker than I'd imagined, though, to the point it looked nearly black. I cocked my head from left and then to the right, but it didn't matter from what angle I looked, the blood was still the same color.

Ethan turned toward me, smiling, and my heart skipped a beat. My belly turned warm, a sensation I'd quickly become accustomed to over the last three months I'd been living with him. Everything he did made my body react in ways I'd never thought possible. I had no experiences with other mermen to compare it to, but if I had, I suspected it would never have felt like this.

"What do you think, my merman whisperer?" Ethan murmured, voice deep and raw. His dark hair was windswept, eyes unnaturally silver, and pure happiness settled on his handsome face. He was perfect in every way.

A shiver slid down my spine, and I shuddered, staring at the merman between Ethan's feet. The area around us was covered in blood, but it didn't all belong to Zolo, who'd been a tormenter of mine for years. He glared up at me from where he lay on the floor of the luxury boat, his green-scaled tail flicking in annoyance. Blood coated his forehead and the side of his face, some dribbling from a cut on his lip where Ethan had punched him to stop him from moving. His blond locks were also coated with the sticky substance, and his chest, covered in fine blond hairs, had a large gash across it from where the knife had sliced his skin.

Aza lay beside him, eyes wide, but he was as dead inside as he was out. His tail—a gold that had caused many of my brothers to be jealous—was

gone. Sawed off. Ethan had already stored his tail away like the precious possession it was. My human liked to call it *proof*.

The stench of the blood and guts filled the air and it was putrid. I couldn't help but scrunch my nose up at it.

Zolo yipped, or at least, it sounded like yipping to Ethan. He couldn't understand what Zolo said, but even as a human myself now, I could distinguish the meaning of his words.

"Lyric, you traitor. Is this what you've become? A killer?" Zolo arched upward, but Ethan snarled at him, and his fist went flying into Zolo's temple. Zolo crashed to the floor again, and he groaned. The sound was music to my ears.

Tilting my head, I smiled. I couldn't speak because I'd struck a bargain and chosen legs over my voice, but Zolo saw my joy. With the way I glowed with excitement, he had to have realized.

"How could you do this to your own people?"

Easily, I wanted to say. The smell of salt in the air made me lean back against the edge of the boat. I sat on a bench and it was the ideal spot to watch what Ethan was doing to the two mermen.

"Lyric! What would your brothers say? Your father?" Zolo's voice had always annoyed me. It was loud. Abrupt. Domineering. He acted as though he was the most important being in existence. He was loved under the ocean, in Atlantia, but not on this boat. In the human world, he was obsolete.

Here, I had the power.

Ethan slammed his fist against Zolo's face again, and he cried out in agony. The sound made my toes curl in delight.

"Shut up, you piece of shit," Ethan sneered. He might not have understood what Zolo was saying, but I had learned Ethan hated the sounds mermen made.

My human smiled and stood, stretching his shoulders. His hands were covered in blood, a mixture of Aza's and Zolo's, and he'd never looked more handsome. He grabbed a length of rope and expertly tied Zolo's wrists together, securing the end tightly to a ring on the boat. Zolo let out a hiss. The noise earned him another punch, this one to the stomach.

Ethan straightened and moved toward me, and like the good little slave I was to him, I leaned forward expectantly. He touched my cheek and then ran his fingertips along my jaw, smearing blood across my face. The

lifeblood of my enemies. My bullies. Mermen I'd hated for as long as I could remember. Then, he traced my lips with his thumb, and I darted out my tongue to taste the crimson fluid.

My human smiled, and my belly fluttered. "You're so beautiful, Boy."

Boy. It's what he called me because he didn't know my name. I'd decided early on that I preferred Boy to the name my father had given me. Tilting my head farther back, I plumped my mouth in his direction, and the smirk he gave me was worth it. He leaned down to capture my lips, and between his taste and that of the blood, I was floating high in ecstasy. He held my face between his hands, and I whimpered into his mouth, the only noise I could make outside of moans and grunts.

Ethan slid his hands to my shoulders and then down my arms, tracing my body like I was clay he was molding, until he had me on my feet. His palms found my asscheeks, squeezing.

My cock twitched, already half hard. To have the organ that human males used to mate had been a new experience for me, but I'd decided from the first time I saw one that I liked it. Mating was much more interesting in human form.

"Fuck you," Zolo hissed, swinging his tail. I hadn't realized how close he was to us, and he managed to strike Ethan in the back. My human crashed into me, and I spun to avoid spilling over the side. I didn't grab Ethan in time, though, and he went flying into the water.

I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The waves crashed against the boat, making it rock, and even though it was sunny, the ocean was wild today. I grabbed the side of the boat, searching.

I couldn't see him.

Ethan, I saved you once; I can save you again. This time, though, I didn't have a tail. I was human and not nearly as powerful as I had been as a merman.

Ethan, where are you?

CHAPTER TWO

Lyric

Around a year ago….

I stared at the object in my hand and the weird shape of it. I'd never quite seen anything like it before. Long and round at the tip with two circular objects hanging from underneath one end, I couldn't quite understand what the people above the water used this for.

"Do you know what that is?" Pru asked, his waist length hair dancing in the water around his head. I once had hair as long as his before I sheared it off with a blade I'd found in father's hunting weapon vault. Now mine barely reached past my shoulders

"What?" I asked, turning the human object in my hand.

"It's what humans use to mate." Pru swam around me, flicking his emerald tail like he always did when he wanted to show off. His scales were prettier than mine, and they sparkled like lost treasure under the sunlight that filtered through the water.

"I don't understand." I stared at the human contraption and turned it around in my hands again. How did humans mate with this? It was pink and almost see-through.

"It's a phallus!" Pru said, chuckling. He did a swirl in front of me before he swam closer and pointed at the tip of the long part. "That's where their *essence* comes out. It impregnates their females."

"Where?" I stared down at the end of it, squinting. "I don't see any essence."

"And this…." Pru wrapped his hands around the two round sections of the phallus, squeezing them. "This is where the essence is created."

"How?" I turned it around in my hands again, but it seemed solid.

“What you have in your hand is fake, though. The real thing is connected to the human males. Here.” Pru patted himself just below his belly, near where his tail began. “That’s why they wear pants. So they don’t spray it everywhere and impregnate all the human women.”

“That sounds scary,” I murmured, attempting to decide whether I should drop the object or not, but it was human, and I always kept everything that I found from above in my treasure box.

“They are. Human males are *very* terrifying. Alas, it’s why I don’t visit the surface often. They are scary beings, Lyric. You don’t want to go up there.”

I did, though, and had since I’d found my first piece of treasure. Mother explained that it was a doll, and even though one of the legs had been ripped off and the hair was twisted and matted, it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. That was when I’d first wished I had legs, like the one the doll had, except I wanted two and not just one. I’d told Mother that, and she’d laughed and patted my head before telling me that I could never be human.

“What is this, then?” I asked, holding up the object toward my older brother. “Why do you think they have something shaped like their breeding tool?”

“I don’t know.” Pru shrugged, his green eyes glimmering in mischief. “Humans are strange.”

I shook my head. As far as I was concerned, they were interesting—a mystery I wanted to solve.

“It’s your birth date today,” Pru said, as though I wasn’t aware that I’d finally turned twenty-five summers old. “Are you going to do it?”

I knew what he was talking about, of course: the journey. When our kind turned twenty-five, we finally had the right to travel to the surface and feel the sun on our faces for the first time, breathe in the air that the humans used. We could never stay above water for long, but we were taught that as soon as our lungs hurt, it was time to return to the depths, away from the dangers that were humans. Our elders told us stories of the humans, and how they killed without mercy. They told us to always be wary of them, to hide whenever we saw them in their floating contraptions, but I’d felt anything but fear when I listened to the stories. I wanted to meet one and to understand how they lived their lives. I wanted to *be* one of them.

“Yes. I’m supposed to meet Grandfather at the throne room soon.”

“Now, actually,” Pru said, grinning. He’d always had such a beautiful face, with high cheekbones, sparkling eyes, and a pretty mouth. The men and women of Atlantia loved him, though not as much as they loved our other brother, Crown Prince Wily. Our eldest brother was the epitome of merfolk. He was regal in all the right ways. “Grandfather sent me to get you.”

“Oh.” I stared down at the object in my hand, the phallus, and frowned. I didn’t want to lose it, and if any other merfolk saw it, they’d throw it in the Pits: the darkest and deepest trench of the sea. They hated everything to do with humans. “I’ll take this to my treasure box, and then I’ll go.”

Pru rolled his eyes. “Why do you keep their possessions?”

“Because they are beautiful,” I murmured, running my hand down the phallus and over the circular ball shapes attached.

Pru waved his hand. “If you insist, hurry up. You know Grandfather doesn’t like to be kept waiting. He’s busy.”

I nodded and didn’t waste any time, flicking my tail to propel me forward. I swam as hard and fast as I could, heading in the direction of my human treasures that I kept secure in an old wreckage not far from Atlantia. The merfolk avoided this area, claiming the humans would come back for it eventually. It’d been here since I was born, and still they had not come for it.

I sneaked through a hole in the wood and it creaked. Sharks sliced through the water around the old floating device—the humans called it a boat—but they never worried me. They had enough food without worrying about the merfolk, and they were used to us being around. This was their home as much as ours.

Heading toward the treasure chest—it’s what Mother had told me they called it—I opened the lid and stared at all the human possessions I’d collected over the years. My prizes ranged from the balls they kicked, to things they ate with, to sparkly coins. I’d obtained knowledge of what the objects were over the years, too, by talking to family and other merfolk who’d seen the humans, and even though they hated talking about the world above, they’d tell me so I would leave them alone.

I placed the possession on top of all my other treasures and smiled. *There.* Another human piece for my collection. I didn’t know the reason they had the phallus, but I was sure someone would know. I’d ask around later. Mind made up, I closed the lid to the chest and turned, sneaking back

out of the hole. I didn't get far before someone tackled me, and I did a twirl, the breath knocked out of my lungs.

Huffing, I spun with my fists up, ready to fight. Familiar laughter made my eyes narrow as my gaze settled on *Zolo*, one of the mermen I hated the most. He laughed harder, the lines around his eyes becoming prominent as he turned to his friends and pointed at me.

"Look at the human lover. Such a *papayah*."

His friends sniggered, and I gritted my teeth at his use of our old language. The word he'd used wasn't spoken often because it was insulting in all the worst ways, but it was something Zolo had called me since we were younglings. I didn't understand it at first, not until he'd called me the name in front of my brothers, who'd gasped in shock. It was Pru who had attacked Zolo, and he was punished for it. No one believed that Zolo, as perfect and charming as he was, would call me that.

"What are you doing?" I snapped, crossing my arms. "My grandfather wants to see me."

"Ah yes, it's time for you to go to the surface." Zolo shook his head, his long blond hair—darker than mine—floating around his shoulders. "I bet you'll like it up there, human lover. Why don't you just go to the sea witch and make yourself human for good? It'd save us from seeing your *papayah* face again."

His friends snickered, and I glanced around at them. Aza was the only one whose name I knew, though only because he was the cruelest after Zolo. His tail was a rare gold and as beautiful and glittery as his eyes, which were the same color.

Aza smirked. "He's a coward, that's why."

"I am not!" I'd thought about it, of course, going to the sea witch, who'd been banished by the elders hundreds of years ago. I'd never seen him, but I'd heard rumors about how ugly he was. He'd once been a merman, they said, until his greed turned him green and wrinkly. I didn't know how much I believed of the whispers, though. It was said he'd studied the darkest magic, born from the days when we'd had predators called the *Mayas*. They'd since died out, but not before the witch could learn the most despicable magic from them.

"You are weak," Aza sneered, his mouth curling. "It's embarrassing to call you our prince. You're a weakling. You haven't been on one hunting trip with your father and brothers."

“I don’t like the way they hunt.” I flicked my tail in annoyance.

Aza snorted. “Nay, you’re *scared*.”

“He’s a coward,” another of them bellowed and then laughed. I remembered this one’s name, too. Ribbins was the son of one of the lords.

With a shake of my head, I glanced in the direction of Atlantia. It wasn’t a long swim, and I could possibly make it home before they caught me. Other times they’d chased me and grabbed me, they’d held me down while they mocked me and pinched my skin. They were bullies, cruel as the *Mayas* were rumored to have been.

I took the chance, flicking my tail hard in a way that gave me a push forward. Swimming as fast as I could, I slotted my arms against my side to allow me to slip through the water even more swiftly. I heard them, yelling and laughing, giving me a chase that I knew they wanted. The sooner I got away from them, the better.

I managed to reach the boundary of Atlantia just before Zolo caught me, and he growled because he knew he couldn’t hurt me inside the thick stone walls built centuries ago. I turned and grinned at him. “You can’t touch me here, Zolo.”

Zolo smiled politely at a mermaid who swam past us and raised his hand in a wave. She giggled and fluttered her fingers at him as she floated past, and then he turned his attention back on me, eyes narrowed. “You won’t stay here forever, human lover. You’ll want to go back to your *treasure* sooner or later, and when you do, I’ll catch you.”

His friends laughed and sneered at me as they turned, swimming away. Zolo gave me a hard glare before he followed them.

I breathed out a sigh of relief, placing a hand over my pounding heart, before I headed toward the castle where Grandfather, and Father, too, would be waiting for me. Nodding at the guards as I sped through the water past them, I hurried onward between the open large golden doors and swam into the throne room. Father and Grandfather were waiting for me like I expected, with Father sitting on his throne and Grandfather floating beside him. They both smiled when they saw me, and I hesitantly returned the gesture as I finally made it to them.

“My king. King-Father.” I bowed my head at them.

“My son. You made it. What took so long?” Father frowned at me, his gaze stopping just below my belly, and I glanced down at my fins. A piece of seaweed hung from my red tail, but not just any. The purple leaves gave

me away because this plant was the same type that could only be found around the wreckage. Father sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Lyric, have you been near the human boat again?”

I inclined my head. “Yes, Father.” There was no use lying to him.

“Why?” He glared harder, those blue eyes of his demanding answers. No one quite did that kind of stare as Father did. It sent a shiver down my spine. He’d always been a hard merman, but he’d become even stricter since Mother died when I was six.

“My treasure is there.”

“Your treasure?” He turned his strong gaze to my grandfather. “What did I tell you? He’s not ready to go to the surface. He’d sooner try to *talk* to the humans than stay away from them.”

“I am ready,” I pleaded. “Please, let me go to the surface. I’m twenty-five summers old now.”

Father shook his head. “It’s dangerous up there, Lyric, and humans are not fish. You can’t control them. They are murderers.”

“So are you.” The words were out before I could stop them. I pressed my mouth together into a thin line when fury slid over Father’s face. I quickly continued, “You hunt for food. Does that not make you a murderer?”

“That’s different. I kill so our family can eat.” He pushed himself off his throne, green tail flipping in annoyance. Pru had inherited his looks, not just the same tail, but the same hair and strong brow, too.

“How do you know they don’t do the same thing?” I asked, although I knew the truth. Father and my brothers didn’t just hunt for food, they hunted for humans, too. The one time I followed them without my father knowing, I’d seen him drag a human who’d fallen out of a boat deep under the water where the poor soul drowned. My family was not innocent.

Grandfather shook his head at me, holding up his palm. His silver hair glinted under the light that glimmered through the glass windows, made from items they’d found in human wreckage. The merfolk chose what they were scared of and what they thought they could use. “Enough, Lyric. Do not speak back to your father.”

“But, Grandfather, I want to go to the surface. It’s my right.”

“He is correct, Naro.” Grandfather turned his attention on my father. “It *is* his right. He is twenty-five now.”

“I have never argued against my other sons going to the surface, but Lyric is too interested in the humans.” He turned his back to me and whispered something I couldn’t hear. Grandfather nodded and they conversed quietly.

My heart thumped against my ribcage, and I held my breath, waiting and hoping, until finally Father looked at me again with a grim face. “Fine. You may go to the surface. Tonight, after the sun sets and the moon has risen.”

“But, I wish to see the sun above water. Feel its heat on my skin,” I argued.

“Don’t push your luck, Lyric. I’m tempted not to let you go up there at all,” Father warned, pointing his finger at me. “Tonight, when there’s less chance of a human seeing you.”

I sighed and nodded. “Yes, Father.”

“Good. Your grandfather will prepare you for the journey.” He swam toward me and cupped my face, placing a kiss on my forehead. “You look so much like your mother, Lyric. Never forget that I love you, son. I do everything I can to protect you.”

I closed my eyes and forced back another sigh as I opened them again. “I know.”

Father watched me, and I stared back until he shook his head and waved his hand toward the door. “I’ll leave you to your grandfather. Your brothers and I are going hunting again. You’ll see us after your trip to the surface, and we’ll celebrate this milestone.”

I did smile then, excitement buzzing through my body. My blood felt too hot and my face grew warm. “Yes, Father.”

He gave me a final stare before he swept past me and out the doors. Grandfather shook his head with a grin, waving his hand at the two thrones, one which was my father’s and one that had been my mother’s. “Shall we go over the preparations?”

I nodded enthusiastically.

There was no telling how long we sat there, my grandfather warning me of everything to take care of, but when he was done, the sun no longer glimmered through the water, lighting up Atlantia, and it was time for me to go to the surface. Excitement didn’t explain how I felt. My nerves bundled just under my skin, and touching my arms made me shiver. My tail swished, and I was unable to sit still.

Grandfather smiled at me, laugh lines denting the skin around his eyes. “Are you ready?”

“I was born ready.” I bit my bottom lip when Grandfather waved his hand upward.

“Then swim free, Lyric. Go see the surface.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I rushed out the doors of the castle, waving at the guards again as I stopped just outside and stared up. This was it, the moment I’d been waiting for.

The surface.

“Is it that time, Prince Lyric?” one of the guards asked, an older merman with short silver hair and a pink tail that twinkled with seafoam green highlights. I couldn’t remember his name, but he’d been in Father’s service for a long time.

I grinned and nodded. “Yes.”

“Be safe up there. Those humans are cruel.” He hummed, gripping his long gold spear in front of him. “Stay out of sight.”

I tilted my head, smiling again because I didn’t believe him. They were all so scared of humans, but I’d always doubted that they were any different from us. “Thank you.”

Not waiting for another warning, I propelled myself up. I took a deep breath and focused on the darkness.

Grandfather had warned me about how the water changes near the border between water and air. “You’ll feel it. It’ll get a little harder to breathe. Not impossible, just harder.”

I was already beginning to recognize the signs. My breaths came shorter, and the water felt like it was getting thinner until I broke the surface.

I let out a gasp when my head and shoulders were no longer in water. I was here. *Above*. And it was beautiful. The night sky wasn’t as dark as I’d imagined, with the white globe hanging high in the air. Father had called it the moon. It wasn’t quite like the sun, but I enjoyed the sight of it as well. Clouds clumped together, hiding the stars I’d heard so much about, but I didn’t mind. There would always be other nights.

A loud noise made me startle, and I turned, staring at where it had come from, and my mouth dropped open. I didn’t think I’d see a human, not at night, but there they were on their floating device: the boat. The device wasn’t like the one from the wreck. It wasn’t brown and wooden with large

sail poles, but rather a lot smaller and white. Modern, that's what Pru would call it. He told me the humans' technology had changed as years flew by. They'd grown smarter with intelligent possessions, and this sleek… boat must have been what he was talking about.

The white capped water rocked the boat roughly, and the men shouted, running around the small vessel. I didn't know what they were doing, but they yelled more, and one leaned over the back to check the things that made the boat move.

A drop of water hit my face, and I frowned up at the sky as more came down. Grandfather had warned me about this, too. He said it was called rain. I'd always found it intriguing. Water from the sky, who would have thought?

The men yelled some more and it caught my attention. The waves rocked the boat harder as the whistling sounds of the wind made them grow bigger. I needed to get a closer look. I swam forward, flicking my tail to move nearer to the boat, where I could hear them better. We'd been taught the human language since we were children. The elders believed we needed to know what the humans said, in case we were ever taken by one.

"Why won't the fucking motors work? What's wrong with them?" an older man screamed as he grabbed one of the other men by the material he wore on the top half of his body. I stared down at my bare chest. What would it feel like to wear *clothes*?

"I don't know, Boss. They cut out and we can't get them to go."

"Where's the fucking mechanic? If we don't get moving soon, the waves will dump us." The older man spun around, yelling some words I didn't understand.

That's when I saw him. *Him*. The most beautiful human I'd ever seen. Did males in their species like being called beautiful? I didn't know, but that's what he was with dark hair cut short to his head, a strong body accentuated by large shoulders, and the most kissable mouth I'd ever seen.

My heart stuttered. I needed to get even closer.

"Dad, what's the problem?" the beautiful man asked, his gaze whipping around the boat.

"Get inside the cabin, Ethan. The fucking motors stopped working," the older man yelled. Now that I thought about it, the humans looked alike, except his father had gray hair and was probably almost twice his age.

Ethan. I loved that name. It was so very… human.

“Let me help you,” Ethan yelled, striding forward, but his father grabbed his upper arm and dragged him closer.

“No, get inside. I don’t want—”

The biggest wave I’d seen so far slammed their boat and rocked them. There was no mistaking the sound of crunching from the floating device.

“Fuck, we’re taking on water! We’re going down, Boss!”

“Fucking fuck. Roger, do something!” another man shouted.

“Ethan, get a life jacket on. Now!” The demand came from the beautiful man’s father again, but it was too late. Another wave hit, and the crunching got louder until the boat was pushed on its side. The yelling from the men made me wince.

I knew what Grandfather would say. *Leave it. Don’t go near them.* I couldn’t do that, though. The beautiful man needed help. Rain beat across my face until it stung, but I knew what I had to do. Dipping back into the water, I sliced through the ocean, searching for the beautiful man. There were bodies of other humans there, but I kept away from them. Some men were opening their mouths, almost as though they were trying to shout, and every time they tried to break the surface, they were battered by waves that forced them underwater again.

I pushed farther until I found him. His eyes were closed, and unlike some of the other men, he was floating in the water, not fighting against the current. It looked like he was sleeping. Tightening my jaw, I shot toward him, my tail cutting through the water to push me forward through the strong pull of the ocean. Quickly, I came to him and grabbed his shoulders, shook him, but he didn’t wake up.

Someone grabbed the fins on my tail and yanked, and I screamed. I spun, kicking my tail hard, and the elderly man I’d surmised as the beautiful one’s father was shoved backward. He reached for me again, but I hit him on the head with my tail harder than I’d meant to. His eyes slipped closed, and he stopped moving and started to sink deeper. There was no chance for me to save both him and his son.

I turned again and grabbed the beautiful man against my body. Using the full force of my tail, I dragged him up and to the surface. But the waves still bashed against us and there was no way I’d keep him up for him to breathe. I glanced around as best I could and laughed when I caught sight of land. It wasn’t far away, close enough to get him there under water.

Dragging him back below, I sped forward. He was lighter under the surface. I kept him against my body, and the closer we got to the shore, the harder it became for me to breathe. I'd heard enough stories to know that I couldn't travel much farther without being washed up on the beach as well. I didn't want to be stuck there with the chance of a human seeing me.

When I thought I was close enough, I pulled us both above the water again and stared at the sand and how the waves crashed against it. All I'd have to do was let him go and he'd wash to the beach.

I glanced at his face under the softening rain and dark-lit sky. Everything about him was perfect, even with his eyes closed. His skin, slightly darker than mine, was soft to touch as I ran my fingers over his cheek. I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his.

"Goodbye, human," I whispered. "Ethan, such a beautiful name."

Releasing my hold on him, I watched his body move with the waves. I stayed, staring until he finally washed ashore. He was heavy enough to keep him from being dragged back into the ocean, and the water was calmer here, almost as if the storm was dying.

I wished I could go on land, watch as he woke up. I wished…. I shook my head and ducked when I heard singing. Maybe someone would find him sooner rather than later.

Then I saw her; a woman with the blackest hair I'd ever seen hurried toward him. She wore clothes, like all the other humans, but hers covered the length of her legs and jealousy sat heavy in my belly—what I wouldn't give to have those instead of a tail. She was beautiful, too.

She leaned down to touch the handsome man, her hands on his face. I heard her voice, a gentle caress of words so quiet I thought I'd miss what she'd said. I could hear her, though. "Sir? Sir, are you okay?"

Then he gasped, jerking upright, giving her barely any time to get out of the way. He stared, mouth agape in bewilderment, out over the ocean, and I ducked farther in, afraid he'd seen me. He did frown in my direction before his attention turned on her—the woman.

"Hi."

She smiled so prettily, brushed at her black bangs as she ducked her head. "Hello. Do you need a doctor?"

"I… what happened?"

"I don't know. I found you here."

Yearning curled at my insides, my fingers tingling. How I dreamed he could see me, know that it was me who'd saved him.

"My dad…. Fuck. My dad. The boat!"

I shook my head and forced myself to drift back toward the deeper parts of the ocean. There was no use for me being here. It'd make me sick with need. I ducked back into the water and headed toward Atlantia. I wondered if I'd ever see Ethan again. Maybe I could do more than see him, if I talked to the sea witch. He had magic. What if he could give me legs?

Excitement stirred inside me again and my arms tingled.

It wouldn't hurt to ask.

○○○○○

IT TOOK ME A *VERY* LONG TIME TO FIND WHERE THE SEA WITCH WAS LIVING and he wasn't anything like I'd imagined. He wasn't green, but he wasn't pretty, either. Scars crisscrossed his face and his eyes were strange: one a vibrant green and the other a strange red. Were his disfigurements the consequences of practicing with dark magic?

"Why are you here, little prince?" The witch sneered, nostrils flaring in irritation. He wasn't *ugly*, even with the scars and weird eyes. He had a handsome face and soft jaw, and a muscular chest with skin a shade lighter than mine. Definitely not green.

"I want legs," I announced as confidently as I could.

The witch grunted and flicked his tail, swimming toward what looked like a chair made of stone. He sat, resting his elbow on the arm, and stroked his chin. His deep red hair was cut short like mine, and I'd never seen anything quite like it before. "And why would you want that?"

"I want to be a human and live above the surface. I've met the man I will marry."

"Marry?" The witch laughed, and I cringed at how mocking it sounded. "You poor, innocent *child*. Humans are no better than merfolk, if not worse." His top lip curled and the puckered skin of a scar that swept over his mouth upturned with it. "Love is a trap."

"I want to be a human," I repeated with more force as I swam closer. Raising my chin in determination, I held out my hand to him. "I'll accept any deal."

“You fool.” He shook his head and clicked his tongue in a way my mother used to when she was mad at me. “Does your brother know you’re here?”

“My brother?” I furrowed my brows in confusion and dropped my arm. “Which one?”

“Wily. He cares deeply about all his brothers. I doubt he’d let you come here.”

My frown deepened. “How do you know Wily?”

The witch snorted and flicked his tail in my direction, and I took it as a gesture that he wanted me to go away. I wasn’t going to do that, though. I’d come here for a reason, and I wasn’t going to leave until I got what I wanted.

“I am a prince of Atlantia. You should do what I say.” I crossed my arms, as though that would make me seem more confident. I’d never used my political position before because I hated being a prince, but I’d do anything to be a human.

He laughed again and cocked his head. “Oh, really? You’re so much like him.”

“Wily?” I asked.

He shook his head and pursed his lips. “Fine. If this is truly what you want, I’ll give it to you.”

Excitement made my skin prickle and I grinned. “Really?”

“Nothing is for free, little prince.” He shot forward and grabbed my chin in his fingers with a hard grip. I gasped, but that only made him tighten his hold. “I’ll give you the legs you want, and the ability to still understand your merfolk family, even as a human, but I want your voice in return.”

“My voice?” I mumbled, eyes widening.

“If you’re so sure this human will love you, make him do it without speaking.” His mouth twisted into a cruel grin. Now I understood what they meant when they said he was ugly because I’d never seen a demented smile like it before. “Your voice for legs.”

I should have said no, but I nodded instead. “Deal.”

I would never forget the way he laughed then.

CHAPTER THREE

Ethan

I rolled my shoulders and sighed into the fingers that clamped down onto them, digging into all my sore bits. “A little to the left.”

Teena sighed and did as I asked, moving her hands and massaging my muscles there. “The town’s talking about you.”

I snorted and leaned farther back against her. She had her legs on either side of my body, and I sat between them. Teena was the prettiest whore in Loutu, Florida, but if you asked her, she preferred to be called a working woman. As if there was any difference. She still serviced dick, either way.

“When are they not talking about me?” I asked with a shrug.

“They say you’ve gone mad.” Teena managed to get a particularly sore spot, and I cringed.

“Fuck, that hurt.” I shifted away from her, and she dropped her hands as I turned to look at her. “What do you think?”

“I think you pay, so I don’t care if you’re mad or stupid.” She brushed some of her brown hair off her face and sighed. Her English accent came off stronger right after we had sex, and I’d always been tempted to ask her if having orgasms were the reason. “Are you mad?”

“I’m angry, but not crazy.” I stood and searched for my sneakers, finding them over near the door. At least I already had my pants on. My shirt was on the bed so I grabbed that, too, and soon I was fully dressed.

“Only a mad person would believe in mermaids.” Teena spread her legs, seemingly uncaring that she was still completely naked. With a body like hers, it wasn’t hard to see why.

“Merpeople. There’s mermen too.” I winked at her as I pulled out my wallet, grabbing a wad of bills and throwing them on the dresser beside the

bed. She knew I was good for it. I'd been seeing her two nights a week for months now.

"Oh, what about fairies? Do they exist too? Or giants. I'm sure they do, too, if merpeople do." Teena rolled her eyes and stood, placing her hands on her hips. Her tits were nice and perky, one of the many reasons I loved spending the night with her, but her attitude needed work.

"Don't get smart with me. I pay to fuck you, not get your opinion." I glared at her. "If you don't want to lose a customer, learn to keep your mouth shut, whore."

She huffed. "You know I hate being called that."

I held out my hands. "I don't give a fuck."

"I just got into town eight months ago. After this thing with your dad happened. Are you at least gonna tell me what this is about?" She strode forward and grabbed her robe, slipping it on before tying it up in the front. "Why are you so angry at the world, huh?"

"I'm not." Fuck, I was. I sighed and ran a hand over my head. "What have you heard?"

"Some things, like your dad was as mad as you are. He believed in mermaids, too, and he spent the last years of his life searching for them. A storm finally got him in the end, at least that's what the gossips say."

I sighed, not exactly surprised by what the people in this town had to say about him. They'd never liked my father, from the moment he and Mom moved into town. Loutu was on the coast of Florida, a dream come true for anyone. Dad, a true fisher at heart, had loved the idea of coming here with my pregnant mom. They called it their home until Mom drowned. I didn't know what he saw that day because my ten-year-old self hadn't been there, but since then, he'd sworn mermaids existed. He made it his mission to find and hunt them down.

"Which gossip are we talking about? Mrs. Darla?" I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. They're all the same."

I headed toward the door of her hotel room, one she often rented for days where she sold herself.

"Are you going to tell me why you believe in them, then?" Teena grabbed her cigarette pack and knocked a cig out, popping it into her mouth.

"No," I said simply before I exited and stalked down the narrow hallway lined with horrible shaggy gray carpet and light yellow walls. It

reminded me of something out of the seventies: psychedelic, ugly, and the kind you'd see in a horror movie. But the room was cheap, and I supposed that's what Teena cared about.

I nodded at the desk attendant on my way out the glass doors and breathed in the scent of fresh ocean air. While the hotel looked shit, it was in the perfect location, right by the sea. The waves rolled luxuriously on the beach today, a gentle crest of white caps, not like the night I'd been found on the sand by Amber, the baker's daughter.

Shaking the thoughts of that night from my head, I walked along the street, ignoring the way people stared at me, as though I would pop a second head out any second. They were the kind of looks I was used to and had been since my father started talking about the existence of mermaids. I hadn't believed him, either, and thought he was crazy, like the rest of Loutu, until that night he died. It was a blur of memories that mixed together to give me flashes, but the one prominent thing I remembered was *him.* A tail, vibrant red and scaled like a fish's, and a man's slim chest. The night our boat went down, he'd been there. He'd taken me to the beach for Amber to find.

When I spoke about what I'd remembered, I'd been tarred with the same brush as my father.

Mad.

Crazy.

Lunatic.

The damning descriptions of me where never-ending, and I finally understood my father and how he'd felt.

"Hey, Ethan!" Joey, my second-in-command, waved his arm from the boat and grinned. His sailor's cap was crooked, and he had on that ridiculous blue-and-white striped shirt he liked wearing just to piss me off. He acted as though we were actually in the navy. He'd joined my crew to get away from his parents, or at least that's what I assumed.

"Are we ready to go?" I asked as I headed down the marina to my luxury yacht, all pristine and white, and mid-sized so it was big enough to be relaxing but small enough to sit comfortably in at the jetty. I'd bought it from my inheritance, thanks to my father's will and my grandfather's oil company, making me an oil tycoon. My uncle handled the business, though, and my share was only what came from Dad.

Joey stood on the back deck, leaning his hands on the shiny silver railing around the edge. He waved his arm, gesturing to the boat. “She’s as clean as the day you bought her, Boss.”

“Good.” I glanced down the jetty toward a group of men that ambled our way. The rest of the crew. The ones who’d come out with us before didn’t believe me about the existence of mermaids and mermen, either, and they were only here for the money. I didn’t care what they thought, as long as I had the help. I traded through my crew each trip, taking back to sea the fishermen who pulled their weight and getting rid of the ones who gave me problems. “This them?”

Joey glanced in the direction of the men and nodded. “Yep. That’s them. There’s Taylor, see?”

I grunted. Taylor Cole had been part of our crew from the first trip. He was good at his job, even if he let it be known he thought searching for merpeople was ridiculous, but he was Amber’s brother and he didn’t let us down.

There were ten men who stopped in front of me, ranging in sizes and appearances. Some looked rougher than others, their skin leathery from the sun. Then there was Taylor, who had skin that looked like he’d never seen a day of work in his life. All dark haired and rosy cheeked. No one would have guessed he was a few years older than me.

“Welcome aboard.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets and stared around at them. Usually I could tell who’d give me trouble, but no one stood out this time. They looked like hardworking fishermen. “You know why you’re here.”

The men either grunted or nodded.

“Good. I give you one chance. One. If you fuck up, I’ll throw your ass back on land, and you’ll never come back out with us again. Am I clear?”

Again, they made their responses known.

Happy with their answers, I pointed at Joey. “Joel Harris. He goes by Joey. He’s my second-in-command. You got a problem when I’m not around, you go to him. And I’m your captain. Ethan Turmont.”

I could almost see their brains working and how some of their mouths parted, like they wanted to ask me but weren’t sure if they should or not. The newbies were always surprised to learn who I was. I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, *that* Ethan Turmont. Yes, my father died in a storm while searching for mermaids, and yes, that’s what we’re searching for, too. If you

have a problem with that, leave, now." I waited, and like I expected, two men snorted and turned on their heel, storming away as though the job wasn't worth the money. There were always a couple, even though they were warned we were searching for the unknown. They just didn't know what and who for until they arrived.

"Okay, for those who are still here, get on the boat."

Heavy footsteps echoed around them as they shuffled onto the gangway that connected the boat to the jetty. When the last of them was on, I walked across the gangway, too, before I grabbed the rope, tugging the board up and connecting it to the boat again. When the quick chore was done, I took the stairs up to the wheel and started the engines, which roared to life.

Joey was at my side in minutes, collapsing into the second seat beside mine. "Another trip, Captain."

I snorted. "Another trip."

"You reckon we'll find one?"

I sent him a look of disbelief. "No, Joey. I'm spending all this money on searching for them because it's fun."

He held out his hands toward me and laughed. The red curls on his head bounced as he moved forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. "No need to get defensive. I only asked."

"You ask every time. *Do you think this'll be the trip we find one?* The answer will always be the same. We look and search, and when it comes time, we will find one and prove my father was telling the truth, that he's not crazy, or mad, or whatever insult they're using these days for him around this shitty town." My hands squeezed around the steering wheel as I put her in Reverse. I turned, checking around the boat, before I backed her out slowly.

When I had The Mermaid Hunter out far enough, I turned and hit the accelerator, taking her out of the marina slow and steady. We passed some familiar faces, and Joey waved at them. I shook my head. He'd make friends with anyone he came across, which made him the complete opposite of me. It was easier for me to hate people.

It took us an hour or so to get out into the ocean, to the long and latitude where we'd left off last time, and I turned to Joey. "Get the sonar ready. We start here."

Joey nodded and climbed down the ladder, heading toward the crew to give them a rundown on what was about to happen. We never knew what

we’d find, or when we finally found the merpeople, how strong they’d be. It was best to have as many men as possible, even if they were untrained.

I sighed, falling into the leather chair and staring at the horizon. Dad would have loved this boat, slim and sleek with all the right technology. Finding his cryptids would have been a lot easier with my equipment than what he chose to have. He’d always liked keeping things old-school, though, preferring to send the boys down with masks, tanks, and flippers. At least now we didn’t have to go down until we saw something.

Yelling interrupted my thoughts, and I frowned, shoving off my chair and grabbing onto the railing to look at the aft deck. The men were leaning over starboard, even Joey, and there was more yelling.

“What’s going on?” I snapped loudly enough that they could hear me.

Joey glanced up at me. “Boss, there’s a guy in the water. On a piece of floating wood.”

Shock ripped through me, leaving me breathless for a second, before my brain caught up with what I’d heard. I moved down the ladder quickly, running to where they’d gathered. Sure enough, not far from the boat was a young man lying on a piece of thick wood that looked like it could have come from a wreck. His eyes were closed, and he lay awkwardly, knees bent and arms sprawled above his head.

“Get the life preserver!” I pulled myself up the side of the boat, diving off into the water. The waves weren’t as rough as they had been on the last trip we took, but they knocked me around. By the time I swam to the guy, my muscles felt like they were on fire, burning hot. I grabbed the edge of the wood and rolled myself onto it.

“Hey, you all right?” I slapped his cheek, but he didn’t respond. Bending low, I put my ear near his mouth so I could hear his breathing. It was faint but there.

“Boss, catch!” Joey threw the preserver toward me and it landed a few inches from us. The waves were dragging it away, though. Growling in frustration, I dove off the wood and swam toward the ring, grabbing it before turning to swim back. The man didn’t as much as flinch when I pulled myself back beside him, clearly so deep in unconsciousness that he was oblivious to the world of the living.

“Fuck,” I muttered, lifting the guy up as much as I could. He wasn’t as heavy as I thought, even dripping wet. His blond curls clung to his forehead and the sides of his face, plump lips were nearly purple from the cold. He

was shirtless, except for a pair of pants that were torn at his knees. I slipped the orange ring around him and maneuvered him over it before I pushed us both into the water. I nearly lost him, as he was close to slipping out of it, but I managed to grab his arm before an accident happened. Holding onto the preserver, I raised my arm to signal Joey to start pulling us in, which took ten minutes and four men pulling against the current.

The waves were beginning to rock harder, and I cursed when we crashed against the side of the boat and the stranger nearly slipped out of the preserver again.

“Pass me down a rope that I can tie around him,” I yelled up to Joey.

My second-in-command did what I asked, and when I had the rope tied around the stranger’s chest securely, I gave Joey a thumbs-up. He and the men pulled, raising the unconscious man out of the water and up against the boat. When I saw them yank him over the side, I swam around to the port side and climbed up the ladder attached to it. I shivered, the chilly wind making me very aware that I was now dripping wet.

Joey had the man splayed out on the deck and was checking his pulse and breathing, and when he looked at me with thin lips, I knew what needed to happen. I pointed at Taylor. “You know how to drive the boat. Get us back to the marina.” Then I turned to Joey. “Help me get him to the cabin. We need to strip him of his clothes and get him wrapped up, turn the heater on.”

Everyone moved at once. Taylor dragging another man who I knew had been with us before toward the helm. Joey and I lifted the stranger together and we dragged him down the stairs to my cabin, throwing open the door to the small area I considered my home for many months of the year.

Inside was a bedroom, a kitchenette, and a bathroom. Gleaming wood covered all the surfaces and made it look like the luxury boat it was. Lights twinkled in the darkness of the room, illuminating the small alcove that I often retreated to when we had another bad day of searching. I never expected to find a *man* while searching for merpeople, though.

“Into the bathroom,” I ordered.

Joey and I maneuvered the skinny man in the direction of the bathroom and gently lowered him against the wall. I grabbed towels and threw them at Joey before I began working at the man’s pants, dragging them down his slim hips and legs. He didn’t wear any underwear, and I didn’t have the time to care why.

He shivered, but his eyes never opened. I couldn't help but let my gaze wander down his muscle-carved chest to his cock, sitting limp against his thigh, before I shook myself and grabbed the towels from Joey. We dried him as quickly as we could before we had him up and on my bed, the blankets wrapped tightly around his body.

"Don't you want to get him into clothes?" Joey asked, panting in exertion as he stared down at the stranger. Now that the man's blond hair was dry, the curls seemed bouncier and tighter.

I chuckled at the absurdity. "If you want to attempt to get him into clothes, good luck. He's unconscious, Joey, he's not going to help us."

Joey shook his head, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What was he doing in the water? Do you think he was in a boat accident? I didn't see anyone else."

"I don't know…." I sat on the bed beside him, frowning. "Go upstairs. Find out how far we're out. He needs medical attention. Call the Coast Guard while you're up there, we'll need an ambulance when we get back to the marina."

Joey didn't need to be told twice. He rushed out the door, closing it firmly.

The stranger shivered again and his mouth moved, like he was trying to say something, and I leaned in to try hear what he'd said, but there was no sound. I touched his face, his skin as soft as any I've ever felt. Not even a woman's was as smooth and gentle as his.

"Who are you?" I whispered, memories of that night our boat overturned flashing through my head. Had he gone through the same thing?

I ran my thumb over his brow and down his temple, and he sighed, the glimpse of a smile playing over his lips. Fuck, he was beautiful, more than any woman I've known, even Amber in her incredible exquisiteness. His plump mouth parted and he let out a breath, small and barely there, but at least I knew he was still alive.

"We're going to get you back safely," I said, running the pads of my fingers over his bottom lip. "You'll be okay."

CHAPTER FOUR

Ethan

It’d been two days since we got the stranger to the hospital, two days since I waited for news about him. I gave them my contact info, and when I finally got the call, I was on the boat with Joey. The crew had been let off for a few days with pay, and I kept them updated with what we were planning, but I didn’t want to leave until I knew the beautiful man was okay.

“Hello, is this Mr. Turmont?”

“It is.” I stretched and glanced at Joey, who’d stopped the cleaning he was doing to stare at me.

“Your John Doe is awake at Marina Hospital, sir.”

I nearly tripped over my feet trying to get off the boat. Joey clearly didn’t need to ask what was happening because he shook his head and grinned at me as I waved at him on my way down the jetty. Marina Hospital wasn’t far from the harbor, which is how it got its name, and all I had to do was run a few blocks before I got to the three-story red-bricked building that looked older than most of the other ones around town.

I was met by the receptionist, who knew me well by now, and she led me past the security doors.

“You know where to go. Nurse Cassidy is waiting for you,” she said helpfully.

I didn’t bother thanking her as I strode to the elevators and reached the second floor. Like the receptionist had explained, Nurse Cassidy was standing behind the nurses’ desk when I stepped out. She was the same lady who’d helped me with the stranger when I first walked into the emergency room with the paramedics. She was older and had her gray hair pinned at the back of her head. Silver cat-eye glasses perched on her upturned nose. It

also wasn't hard to recognize her as the nurse who had helped me after Amber found me.

She smiled when she saw me and ambled around the desk to stop in front of me. Her light blue uniform dress was pressed perfectly, same as every other time I saw her. "Hello, Ethan."

"Nurse Cassidy." I glanced down the hallway and then back to her. "Is he…."

"He's awake." She waved at me to follow her, and we started a slow journey down the ward. "Though he hasn't spoken. He's tried, but he *can't* speak."

"He's a mute?" I frowned at her.

She nodded. "We believe so, yes, but it seems he's also surprised by that fact. There could be a number of medical reasons why he can't talk. His larynx could be damaged or he could still be in shock."

"Have you seen this happen before?"

She hummed before shaking her head. "Not to this extent. We've never had an awake John Doe before. We asked him to write his name, but he couldn't do that, either. Actually, he looked very confused when we gave him a pen and paper." She stopped outside a room numbered 213 and turned to me. "But you did want to know when he woke up. Maybe you can help us with his recovery."

I glanced toward the closed blue door and shrugged. "I'll talk to him."

She smiled and opened the door. Stepping inside first, I walked past the curtain which had been half pulled around the bed to give him some privacy. The moment I saw him, however, I held back a gasp. He was even more gorgeous now that he was dry and not looking like a drowned rat. His skin was healthier, his cheeks brighter, and his eyes were open and the color of the same ocean we'd fished him from—the bluest blue I'd ever seen.

He stared at me for a second. His mouth curled and he held up his palm in a wave. He moved his lips, almost like he was saying *hello*, but when nothing came out, his dark blond eyebrows furrowed.

"Hi." I stepped closer to the bed. "I'm Ethan. I found you floating in the water."

He nodded and grabbed my hand, placing it on his chest, and then he made some dramatic hand gestures that I didn't understand. I turned to Nurse Cassidy, but she shook her head. She pointed at the pen and paper on

the small portable table that rested over his bed, the kind on wheels that most hospitals had.

I grabbed the paper and pen and wrote down my own name before I showed it to him. “That’s my name. What’s yours?”

He tilted his head, nose wrinkling, and looked up at me again. He didn’t move to touch the pen and paper, which made me wonder if he even knew his own name or if he knew how to write.

I sighed, and so did Nurse Cassidy. She squeezed my shoulder. “I’ll be outside if you need me.”

She left, and I watched her go, not quite sure what I was supposed to do now. I didn’t know this man and he didn’t know me. I couldn’t help someone like this, not that I wanted to. My life now revolved around finding the merpeople.

I sat my ass on the bed near his thigh and frowned down at him, and he stared back. There was something about the look in his eyes, though. I couldn’t decide if it made me uncomfortable or not. It felt like worship. Was that because he knew that I’d saved him?

“Do you understand me?”

He inclined his head, and I took that as a yes.

“I found you floating in the ocean on a piece of wood. Were you in a boat accident?”

He shook his head. At least he spoke English.

“What were you doing there?”

He shook his head again. Okay, maybe he *didn’t* understand as much as I thought he did because now he smiled at me.

“What’s your name?”

Another shake of his head.

“Fuck.” I shoved myself to my feet and stalked to the window to stare outside. The Marina Hospital had the perfect view of the ocean, with the waves rocking boats of all shapes and sizes in the harbor. I could see The Mermaid Hunter from here, and Joey, too, but he was more of a dot than an actual person.

Hands touched my arm, and I jumped, turning toward John Doe as he stepped closer to me. He wore a white hospital gown that reached his knees, but his feet were bare. Smiling at me, he pressed his hand against the glass of the window and looked at me again with a tilted head.

“Yes, out there. I found you out there.” I shifted closer to him, like an instinct I couldn’t deter, and his gaze traveled down my body with an intent I couldn’t quite work out. His stare jerked back to my face and he stepped closer, bringing a strange crisp scent of the ocean with him. How was that even possible?

He reached up and touched my mouth with his finger, pulling at my bottom lip, and his smile grew wider.

“Who are you?” I mumbled, a strange sense of recognition stirring in my belly. It was like I knew him, but didn’t. Maybe I’d met him before.

He pushed himself up on his tiptoes, and his mouth was so close to mine that it didn’t take a genius to figure out what he was about to do. A stranger—a *male*—was about to kiss me. It was at that point I should have taken a step back, told him off in my typical asshole way, but I stood there instead, let his lips touch mine in a gentle, inquisitive kiss that felt both strange and attractive. He was a dude, yet his mouth was so soft, and it didn’t last long before he pulled back. A flush filled his cheeks and his mouth curled in a wide grin, almost like he was laughing without the noise of it.

I frowned down at him, at the way his chin dipped in embarrassment, and moved with an outrageous need that I’d never felt in my whole life. I didn’t do anything gentle, so I grabbed his face between my hands and slammed my mouth against his in a kiss that would have made whores blush. Kissing wasn’t the right term for what I did. I fucked his mouth as hard as I could, tongue shoving between his lips.

By the time *I* was satisfied, his cheeks were flaming red and his knees nearly gave out. I grabbed him before he could fall and carried him back to the bed, dumping him there.

“That’s how you kiss, Boy.” The name for him slipped out so easily, like that was what it was always meant to be.

He touched his lips, staring at me with wide eyes.

“Are you going to tell me who you are?” I growled, gripping his chin in a rough grip. “Tell me how you got there.”

He tried to shake his head, but he couldn’t move it much with how I was holding him.

“You don’t want to, or you don’t know the answer?”

He held up two fingers to me, and I thought that meant the second answer. I could work with that.

“Fine. Listen to me very carefully, Boy. If any memories of who you are come back, you’ll tell me immediately. I don’t care if you have to use charades or if you write it down, but you will tell me.”

Blinking, he nodded.

“I leave on my boat this afternoon. I’m a hunter, Boy, and I hunt merpeople.”

His eyes widened again and those big blue globes stared curiously at me.

“Yes, you heard me right. Merpeople. They’re real, and I’ll prove it. I lost two days because I saved you, so you’re going to come on The Mermaid Hunter, my boat, with me this afternoon, and you’re going to help me and my crew. Do you understand?”

Hesitation passed over his face, and he glanced down at his bare knees. The gown had ridden up his legs, and I couldn’t help but follow his gaze. I placed my hand on the inside of his right knee and slid it up his thigh, and he swallowed, the small apple in his throat bobbing.

I stopped midthigh, tickling the unblemished skin there. “Do you understand?”

He glanced up at me with a passionate gaze that made my belly turn. Fuck. He was a *guy*, with a dick and balls, and one I didn’t even know. Why the hell did I want to kiss him again? No, I wanted to do more than that. My cock twitched in my pants at the feeling of his heated skin under my fingers. I wanted to *fuck* him.

He reached out nervously and cupped my cheek, smiling. His nod was the only answer I needed.

Convincing Nurse Cassidy to let him go would be harder. Usually they needed proof to who he was and then insurance, but everyone felt sorry for me in this town. Getting him out of the hospital would cost some cash, but it could be done.

“Are you insane?” Taylor asked from where he’d perched himself on the side of the boat. His gaze jumped from me, to Joey, to Boy, and back again.

Boy sat curled up on the bench against the port side of the boat, his legs bent beneath him and his head tilted curiously as he stared at Taylor. I’d gone out to buy him a few sets of clothes, some jeans and T-shirts, and

some shorts for the hotter days. It was spring going into summer in Florida after all. We had scorching days that left sunburns on our skin, the reason I managed to get a dark tan. I'd spent years out on boats, searching for the existence of mermaids with Dad. At the time, I'd loved the tan because it made the girls swoon. Now, the only thing I cared about was getting the job done. Nevertheless, you could still get cold out on the ocean as the boat powered along.

"That's one word the people in this town used to describe me." I glanced around at the other crew members. A few more of the guys had decided this wasn't worth it and had grabbed their bags and left, which meant I only had five, including Taylor. Joey stuck around, he always did. "Other descriptions include mad and crazy."

"I'm serious, Ethan. You don't even know who he is." He glared at Boy, jaw tight. "He could be a spy."

"A spy?" I snorted. "Who the fuck would he be spying for? Oh, maybe he's really a secret agent for the government. They're onto us. They know we're right and merpeople exist." Rolling my eyes, I shrugged. As much as I believed they existed—I'd *seen* one—everyone else thought I'd gone off my rocker like Dad. No one else was searching like we were. "He's a guy we found in the water who can't remember his name or how he got there."

"It's risky bringing him on the boat," Taylor continued with a growl. He stormed over to Boy and leaned down. "Who. Are. You?"

My blood boiled, and I stalked over to Taylor, grasping his arm and yanking him away from Boy. "He's here because I said so. Stay away from him. You're forgetting who's the captain."

"You?" He laughed and shook his head. "You're bringing a fucking stranger onto this boat. He doesn't even know his own name. He's a dumbass."

I didn't know what compelled me to do it, but I swung, my knuckles meeting Taylor's cheek and sending him flying to the side. He nearly went overboard onto the jetty but caught himself on the railing. Grabbing his cheek and wincing in pain, Taylor glared.

"Fuck you, Ethan. I'm done." He grabbed his duffel bag and threw it over his shoulder, striding across the gangway and onto the jetty.

The other crewmen grumbled, but they followed, and I watched them, not caring enough to stop them.

Joey crossed his arms. The afternoon sun glinted across his hair and the boat as it slowly descended. “Now what?”

I stared at the glowing horizon and smirked. “Now, we go chase mermen.”

“With just the three of us?” Joey peeked a look at Boy. “What do you call him if he doesn’t remember his name?”

“You can call him John. He’s Boy to me.”

The good thing about Joey is that he didn’t question me. He was the kind of dude who went with the flow.

He shrugged. “When do we leave?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Lyric

I’d never quite seen the ocean like this, in a boat and headed toward open water. I was on the surface. It was hard to believe.

I have legs!

Staring down at my two new body parts, I wiggled my toes and grinned. I’d done it. I’d gone to the sea witch and made a deal, although I couldn’t quite remember what happened. The memories were blurs, like flashing images that I couldn’t get rid of. I didn’t know why, but I remembered the sea witch’s voice, deep and condescending as he asked me *why* I wanted to go live with humans. *For love.* He’d thought my answer was ridiculous. He’d laughed. We’d made a deal, but I couldn’t remember what. It must have worked, though, because here I was, on the boat with my human, and I had legs. But I didn’t have a voice.

I opened my lips, tried to say *anything*, but nothing came out. Silence. Frowning, I glanced back at my human, the man I’d given it all away for, Ethan. He was as handsome as I remembered, tall and dark haired with eyes that melted my insides. He’d kissed me, too, so passionately, and I’d felt a strange stirring down below.

As soon as I’d woken in that hospital bed, I’d gone to the *bathroom*—that’s what the nurse had called it—and examined my new body. I still had the same chest and face, but below was different. I had a phallus, exactly the same as the see-through treasure I’d found, and long legs. My tail was gone, and I couldn’t decide if I missed it or not. The human body parts were so plain, the same color as the rest of my skin, unlike my tail which had been red and scaley, glimmering under the diffused ocean light. I doubted my legs would glitter the same way.

Now I was on the *boat* with my human and the smell of fresh ocean water assaulted my nose. I closed my eyes and breathed it in.

“Do you remember anything?”

My human’s voice startled me, and my eyelids flicked open. I glanced at him with a gentle smile and shook my head because that’s all I could do without being able to talk. Even if I could speak, would he understand me?

He rocked on his feet and placed his hands in the holes in the sides of his pants. I didn’t know what they called them, but I was sure they’d have a name. “We’ll travel for an hour or so, keep an eye on the weather. We’re searching for anything abnormal with the radar, something that doesn’t look like an animal. It’s hard to tell sometimes because sharks can have a similar shape to what you’d expect mermen to look like underwater.”

I cocked my head and furrowed my eyebrows. I didn’t understand what he was saying, not really. He was hunting merfolk. *Me*.

“Don’t look at me like that. They’re real. I’ve seen one.”

I widened my eyes at him.

“Yeah. Little more than six months ago, my dad and his crew, including me, were hunting them. A storm came out of nowhere and our boat overturned. I was the only one to survive, and I don’t really know how, but I remember a merman. A fucking merman with a bright red tail swam me to shore.” He shook his head and rocked harder on his feet, his mouth pressed in a thin line. The ocean wind fluttered his hair and it was a little longer than I recalled from when I saved him. “They’re the reason Dad’s dead, so I’m going to find them and hunt them all down.”

I swallowed around my fear and sat straighter in my seat. Would he kill me, too, if he knew the truth? I went to stand, but I couldn’t feel my legs and I nearly collapsed. He grabbed me before my face could meet the floor of the boat.

“Careful.” He laughed and it was so deep and melodic, better than any mermen’s laughs in Atlantia. It sounded different on the surface, too. Lighter, somehow. “Your legs get numb?”

Numb? I didn’t know what that meant, but I nodded.

“We need to find a way to communicate. Do you write?”

I shook my head. I understood now that what the lady had passed me at the hospital had been a pen, I’d seen my human write with it when he signed me out. They wrote their language with it, but I wouldn’t know where to begin.

“You need to learn. I’ll teach you.” He stood me upright, and I stared at him. He was so much taller than I was.

We gazed at each other, and I couldn’t look away from the brown depths of his eyes. I didn’t know any merfolk with that color.

“Do you like dudes or something?” he asked, and I startled.

I nodded, although I didn’t know what he was asking. Dudes was a new word to me.

“I don’t. Never been with one.” His gaze roamed down my body, and I shivered at the intensity of it. Did human males mate with other males like mermen did? Even though the same gender couldn’t result in children, merfolk happily had connections with everyone, no matter their sex. “You been with a guy before?”

I shook my head and smiled. At twenty-five, I was considered too young to have physical connections with other merfolk, but I’d had heard rumors of my people starting early. I’d been scared, too. Being a prince meant I needed a certain decorum.

“Right. Fuck, you’re a virgin.”

Virgin? I’d never heard of that word, either.

“Who’s a virgin?” the other young human male I’d met earlier climbed down the rungs of the boat ladder. *Joey*, I reminded myself. My human had introduced him. I didn’t know where he’d come from because I hadn’t moved from my spot on the seat since we left land. I was curious what this kind of floating device looked like all over, though.

My human snorted. “He is.”

“Shit. He’s never been with a woman? He remember that, did he?”

Their conversation made me frown, and I stared between them.

“He’s into dudes. He kissed me at the hospital,” my human said with a smirk.

“No way.” The other man—Joey—narrowed his eyes on me before he shrugged. “Not surprised actually. He’s prettier than any woman I’ve seen.”

Ethan narrowed his eyes on his friend.

The other human held up his hands and laughed. “What? He is. Look at those eyelashes and mouth, man. I’d love to see what those lips can do.”

“Get back to the fucking wheel, Joey.”

I let out a long sigh. I hated that I didn’t understand what they were saying, but whatever it was had finished because Joey threw his head back

and laughed before he went back the way he'd come, climbing up those steel steps to get on the next level.

"Fucking asshole." Ethan stepped closer, and I turned my attention on him. He licked his lips and something hot stirred in my belly and lower. The twitching feeling was weird, and my skin tingled, heart galloping so fast that I thought I'd faint. "You *are* pretty like a woman."

I wasn't a woman, though. Even with new legs, I was still a male. I had the male mating appendage: the phallus. Maybe I should show him to prove it? I tugged at the string of my pants to loosen them and pulled at the waistband, opening them and my tight underwear that kept my phallus secured, so he could see.

His mouth parted in surprise, but he looked and then stepped back, laughing. "Christ. You actually showed me your cock."

Cock? Was that slang for the phallus? I heard humans had multiple names for the same thing. I smiled and nodded.

"Fuck." He ran his hands over his face and turned to stare at me, chewing at his bottom lip with his teeth. "You're a dude, but fuck it. You *are* pretty." Then he stormed forward and grabbed me so roughly that I nearly tripped backward. He gripped my upper arms and yanked me forward, our mouths connecting hard enough that it hurt. He slipped his hands lower, and then he was grabbing my behind, fingers kneading into my flesh. It felt so good that the strange feelings in my body grew and my phallus shuddered on its own accord.

The experience both hurt and felt good, and I wanted more. I didn't know what was happening, but I needed my human in any way I could get him. I made a noise, low in my throat. It wasn't words, but it was something, and whatever it was made him groan and press against me tightly. Everything felt so good, like an explosion of emotions I hadn't experienced before.

Yes. Every touch was a yes from me.

He broke the kiss and panted, face flushed and pupils blown. "Fuck it." He grabbed my arm and spun me, and I crashed against the side of the boat, the bendy part of my leg pressed into the bench I'd been sitting on earlier. Yanking down my pants, he groaned again.

The cool air danced across the bare skin of my bottom, and I shivered at the cold against my heated body.

"I'm going to fuck you."

I didn’t know what that meant, but I’d let him do whatever he wanted.

“You don’t understand me, do you?” He leaned his chest against my back and his breath teased my ear. “You don’t know what I’m about to do to you, do you?”

Yes. No. The answer didn’t matter. I wanted whatever he did.

“Wait here. That’s an order. Don’t move.”

The heat of his body against my back disappeared, but I didn’t move like I’d been ordered. I stared out at the ocean and the rolling of the gentle waves, so unlike the night I saved him. The sound of something slamming made me jump, and then his hands were at my bottom again, squeezing.

“Fuck, I don’t even care that you’re a dude. Your ass is hot. I want to eat you up.” His hand slid under my shirt and up my back, and I sighed at his touch. Then his hands were gone again, and I waited with bated breath. Fingers dragged at the cheeks of my bottom—ass, Ethan had called it—and opened me up. I couldn’t see that far down, so I didn’t know what was there, but whatever it was, Ethan could have it.

Fingers touched me somewhere between my cheeks, and I gasped, hands curling around the railing. I leaned forward, clenching my eyes closed as a digit, slippery with something, slid into a hole. That’s what was there. Was this what humans used to mate? It was both painful and pleasurable, and I bit at my bottom lip as the mixture of feelings ripped through me like an underwater earthquake. My limbs shook and it became increasingly hard to hold onto the boat.

My cock twitched harder in my underwear until it grew, the soft appendage already half solid. Warmth spread in my belly, and I huffed at the tidal wave of emotions.

“You’re so tight,” my human whispered as he pulled his finger out. Something bigger nudged at my entrance, and I held my breath. “I bet you’re tighter than a woman.”

He pushed whatever it was inside, and this time a world of agony came crashing around me. It hurt, and I squeezed my eyes shut. My arms shook, as did my shoulders, and I gritted my teeth.

“It feels like you’re gonna break off my cock. Relax.”

His phallus? That was what he must have been pushing inside me. That explained everything. He was trying to mate me. I took a deep breath and glanced around, but he grabbed my chin and jerked my head forward again.

“Don’t look at me,” he growled into my ear, biting down at the lobe.

I gasped at the added pain, and closed my eyes again, hoping that would somehow relieve it. Then, he bottomed out, and I felt his hips flush against my ass. I could finally breath again. The tip of his cock hit something inside me and a more powerful need shot through me, making my soft phallus grow again until it felt as hard as a rock. I reached down, felt it, and gasped at the pleasure that made my skin tingle.

“Don’t touch yourself,” he ordered, reaching around to grab my hand and hold it tightly in his. “I want you to come from my cock, you little whore. That’s what you are, aren’t you? A tight little virgin whore.”

I didn’t know what those words meant, but his vicious tone made my body buzz. Clearly he enjoyed saying those things because I swear his cock grew bigger inside me. The pain and pleasure mixed and wasn’t as bad, and I hummed my approval.

“Yeah, you’re a whore for cock.” He grabbed my hair, fingers curling around the strands, and tugged it until my scalp burned as he slid his cock out of my entrance and then back in again with a fast, rough movement. I didn’t know what hurt more, my burning scalp or the stretching of my hole, but it also felt so good I wanted to cry.

I gripped the railing with my spare hand and used it as leverage to push back against him. My cock throbbed, and I couldn’t tell what I wanted, but I needed *something*. A release maybe. There was too much pressure in my body.

“Fuck.” Both his hands went to my hips, and he began to push in and out of me. With every thrust, I was shoved forward, and the only thing that saved me was the seat under my knee and my hand on the rail. My heart raced, my belly tingled, and with my human’s attention on thrusting into me, I took the chance to reach into my pants and pull out my cock. I wasn’t sure what I was meant to do, but instinct led me, and I wrapped my fingers around the hard flesh. Liquid built at the slit of the phallus, and I jerked the firm organ in time with my human’s thrusts.

The world around me spun and tilted, and I felt like I was about to explode. Between the tingles of my skin and the sparks flying around inside my stomach, I knew it was about to be over, I just didn’t know how. The round things dangling beneath my cock grew tighter against my body and I panted, pumping harder until that explosion I was waiting for happened. Some kind of liquid spurted out of the slid of my phallus, slathering the seat beneath me. I was riding a feeling I’d never felt before, a pure ecstasy that

sent my mind floating. Was it joy? I had no idea but I could finally see why even merfolk made connections. It was amazing! I had no words for the trance of need I'd been sent into.

Ethan tugged at my hair harder and shoved in so deep that I thought I'd feel him forever. He was so wide and long, and it was the best feeling I'd ever had. "Fuck, Boy. Right there. Shit. I'm coming."

He stiffened, his fingers tightening in my hair, and then I felt something wet inside my hole. Was it the same stuff that I'd shot onto the seat? Maybe this was how humans really did mate, but I was a male. Male humans could not get pregnant, right?

I turned my head as best as I could to stare at him, watch the way his body trembled. His eyes were screwed shut and his mouth was open as he gave a few last shallow thrusts inside me. I waited until his shoulders had relaxed, and he finally looked at me.

"That's better than with any woman," he said with a smirk.

I nodded because I didn't know what else to do.

A whistle sliced through the air, and we both glanced up at the deck where Joey had disappeared. Now he stood leaning on the rails around it, grinning. "I don't think you're as straight as you think you are, Boss."

Ethan growled. "Fuck off, Joey. Go do some work."

"When do I get a chance at that ass?" He laughed.

My human yanked at my hair again, and I hissed. "Never. The boy is mine."

Joey shook his head. "You're no fun. Fine. I came to get you to tell you we've got something on the radar. Never seen anything like it. Want to come check it out after you've got your cock back in your pants?"

"I'm coming," Ethan said.

Joey threw his head back and laughed harder. "Looks like you already came, Boss."

"I'm going to kill him," my human muttered, pulling his cock from my hole, and then he grabbed his pants and yanked them up over his hips.

I stared at him in wonder. His phallus was a lot thicker and longer than mine, more about the size of the treasure I'd found. He stopped and smirked at me.

"We'll do this again, but I have to do some work." He patted me on the bottom and bent down to grab a white bottle like one I had in my treasure

chest. Throwing it on the seat next to me, he pointed at it. “Good thing I bought lube when I got your clothes, huh?”

I hummed in answer, and then he was gone, going to see whatever his friend had found. I frowned after him before turning back to stare at the water. The boat rocked with the gentle waves and I found it soothing. I pulled my pants up and tucked myself back into them like Ethan had.

Out in the distance a head popped up in the water, and I froze. I couldn’t see who it was from here, but they raised their hand toward me before swimming closer. Peeking up at the second level, I noticed Ethan and Joey were too busy talking about whatever they’d found to notice a merfolk heading our way. Not just any merfolk.

Ribbins.

I winced. Ribbins was one of those jerk friends of Zolo’s. He smirked when he was close enough to talk.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Lyric. Where have you been? Your father sent search parties looking for you. He’s offered rewards to whoever finds you.” Ribbins’ voice sounded no different above surface than it did below, melodic and taunting with a touch of snide. I hated it.

I cocked my head toward him and opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I’d forgotten about my lack of voice for a second.

His brows scrunched together in confusion. Ribbins’ hair was golden short spikes, and unlike his other friends, he had wide shoulders. He was thick with muscles from his work dragging rocks around to build our homes in Atlantia. Even though he was a lord’s son, he did *charity work* to give his family a good name. There was nothing generous about Ribbins though.

“Don’t you have something to say?” He growled, and I shook my head with pursed lips. “Get in the water. You’re coming with me.”

I smiled at him and shook my head again.

“Lyric—”

There was noise from where my human and his friend were and Ribbins’ eyes widened. He ducked into the water, and I watched him go, a small longing deep in my belly. I missed home, but what I was homesick for was mostly my father and grandfather and brothers. Nevertheless, I preferred to stay here with Ethan.

There was arguing, my human and his friend raising their voices, and I turned to them. Ethan shoved Joey before they both laughed.

I liked my human and nothing would make me go home. Maybe… maybe I could even help Ethan get the merfolk he was searching for.

I grinned at the thought.

CHAPTER SIX

Ethan

I glared at Joey and shoved him again for good measure. “That’s a fucking shark, dipshit.”

“How do you know?” Joey laughed and ran a hand through his hair, leaning back against the edge of the boat. If I was in a worse mood, I might have thought about pushing him overboard and driving away.

“*How do I know?*” I shook my head and tapped the screen of the sonar. “Because that’s a fucking shark. I’ve been out here long enough to know what they look like. Have you? You wouldn’t think so, with the way you thought that could have been anything but.”

Joey laughed harder and the temptation to push him grew stronger. I cursed him in my head and glanced toward the boy. He sat where I’d left him with his clothes intact, which was a pity because I liked looking at his pale ass.

“What’s happening there?” Joey asked, stepping closer and nudging me in the arm. “Since when do you like dudes?”

I shrugged and smiled when Boy looked at me with those big, innocent eyes of his. Fucking him had felt amazing, better than any chick I’d been with. “You said it yourself. He’s pretty.”

“Pretty with a cock,” Joey said, smirking. He crossed his arms. “And you won’t share him.”

“Since when have *you* been into dudes?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Always.”

“What?” I opened my mouth in surprise and he gave me a one shoulder shrug.

“You never asked, I never told.”

Fuck. That was a new development. “Well, you can’t have Boy. He’s mine.”

I turned to look at the sonar again and sighed. It felt like every time we were close, it ended up being bust. Sometimes I thought about giving up and moving somewhere people didn’t know me as insane like my father, but I’d always pushed the thoughts aside. Now they were in my head again, and I hated how I’d gotten nowhere with this venture. I often wondered what had gotten my father so obsessed with it. Maybe I was suffering the same fate as him, disconnected from the world and lonely. At least he had a son. I didn’t even have that.

“You all right?” Joey touched my shoulder and squeezed.

“Yeah.”

The sound of footsteps on the metal had me glancing at the stairs that led up onto the navigation floor. Boy appeared, face flushed pink and a whimsical smile on his face. He raised his palm toward us when he got up the ladder and waved his hands in a way I didn’t understand. He sighed and then gestured for us to follow him back down.

I frowned at Joey, but we trailed after him, descending the stairs and over toward the bench seat that he’d been sitting on moments before. He flapped his hands more, and finally, he let out a quiet sigh. He shifted away from us and toward the container we kept fishing nets in. Opening it, he dragged one out, and while my instincts were to stop him from whatever he was doing, I watched him work.

He dropped it on the floor of the boat before he came to us and pushed at our chests, guiding us to the other side.

“What’s happening?” Joey asked, confusion crumpling his face.

“No idea. Just do what he says.” I didn’t know why I *trusted* him, but my gut told me to follow his orders, even if they seemed ridiculous.

When he had us on the opposite side of the boat, he raised his hands as if telling us to stay there, before he grabbed the net off the floor again. He leaned over his side and tapped his hand on the fiberglass. Even though the whole thing was ludicrous, I couldn’t look away from his bubbly ass and the way he presented it to me, almost begging me to fuck him again. But Boy wasn’t paying attention to us. It was almost as if he was trying to catch something’s attention in the water.

“Boy—”

He waved his hand at me, and I pursed my lips together.

Holding the net tightly in his hands, he pressed his knee into the bench seat and leaned over the edge. The sounds of clicking and yipping caught my attention, but I didn't know where it was coming from. Boy cocked his head and then threw the net overboard, the rope we used to drag it back in wrapped tightly around his hand. There was more yipping and screeches, louder than before, and Boy sent us a desperate look as he struggled with the rope.

Joey and I moved on instinct, rushing forward to Boy's side. When we reached him, I noticed what had been making the noises.

A goddamn merman was caught in the net Boy had thrown overboard. In the flesh. Real.

Fucking hell.

Joey gasped, and we both grabbed onto the rope, tugging the heavy as hell merman up as he thrashed around like a fish on a line. The tail—gray-scaled—smacked from side to side, and it hissed at us, or more specifically at Boy. Together, we tugged him up and over into the boat.

The *thing* yipped louder, kicking its tail at Boy, and it would have hit him, too, if I hadn't yanked him out of the way. Boy fell against my chest, panting, and together we stared at our prize.

A fucking merman.

It wriggled on the floor, as though attempting to head for the side, but Joey grabbed a safety oar we brought with us in case we broke down and smacked it over the merman's head. It collapsed, eyes slipping closed and limbs crumpling at its side.

"Fuck," Joey muttered, his chest heaving in short breaths. He turned wide eyes on Boy. "What the hell was that?"

Boy smiled in triumph and glanced up at me from where he rested against my chest. I got the impression that he was searching for approval, so I kissed him hard on the lips, and he moaned against my mouth.

"Ethan… it's a fucking mermaid," Joey whispered, staring at the unconscious creature.

I shook my head. "Not mermaid. Merman." My voice sounded weird to my own ears, and I gently moved Boy away from me so I could venture closer to the anomaly that I'd believed for so long existed, but never *really* believed until now. I was right, and I finally had the proof I needed.

I crouched beside it and loosened the net, throwing it off the merman so I could get a good look at it. My heart thumped so loudly I was surprised no

one else heard it. My gut clamped as I reached down to touch the scaly tail with my fingertips. It felt just like a fish's body.

"What do we do?" Joey asked, scampering forward to squat on the other side. He touched the merman's face and winced. "Thought it would feel like human skin."

"It doesn't?" I touched the stomach, and sure enough, the skin on this creature had a slimy feel and I didn't like it. "All we need is proof and we have it," I murmured.

"Should we take the whole thing back? What if he wakes up?" Joey mumbled, and I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or himself. Maybe both of us. "We can't control him."

He had a point. I didn't know anything about mermen or their strength. Could they survive for long periods out of the water? I slid my fingers down his stomach and over his scaled tail again. "The only proof I need is the tail."

"You want to…." Joey stared at me with wide eyes. His face went a strange, sickly greenish-white, and he shook his head. "I'm not cutting off his tail."

"Why? They're no more human that the fish you catch and gut."

"That's not true," he argued, glancing at Boy over my shoulder as though he'd agree with him.

Boy kneeled beside me and cocked his head. He patted my arm and smiled, and I knew he would agree to anything I said. That compliance made my blood heat with a strange sense of desire. Boy was mine completely, willing to listen to whatever order I gave him, and that did something to me.

"You're both crazy. That's murder," Joey nearly shouted, eyes bugging out of his head. "Ethan, think rationally. Mer*men*. They're human."

I ignored him and turned to Boy, kissing him gently on the lips. "Downstairs there's a small cleaning closet. Inside that is a toolbox. Can you bring it for me?"

Boy nodded and stood, scurrying off to the door that led downstairs. I watched him go, unable to look away from how his pert ass bounced in those pants, and my cock plumped up slightly at the show.

"Ethan, please. Don't be stupid. We can't kill him. We can keep him contained, tie him up."

“That won’t achieve anything,” I said, tearing my gaze away from where Boy disappeared. “We don’t know anything about them. His strength, if he has any telepathy powers. Nothing.”

Joey snorted but still looked distraught. “Telepathy? That’s crazy. Of course he doesn’t have telepathy.”

“How do you know that? Have you met one?” I raised my eyebrows at him.

“We won’t discover what he can and can’t do if we don’t keep him alive.” Joey’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “I won’t have any part of this. It’s murder. You and your *boy* can do it on your own.”

He walked away, his boots thumping on the fiberglass of the boat floor as he ascended the stairs to get away from me. I’d never expected Joey to be a coward, but I shouldn’t have been surprised. The only reason he came on these trips was to piss his parents off. They didn’t want him hanging around a guy that everyone around town called nuts.

The door that led downstairs opened again and Boy stepped out with the red toolbox. He struggled because it was heavy with steel tools and equipment, so I got to my feet and grabbed it from him, earning a smile in thanks. We both strode back to the merman, and I dropped the box beside him—it.

Opening the toolbox, I pulled out a saw I kept stashed in there and tugged off the blade covering. Boy’s mouth parted in surprise, and he glanced from the saw to the merman.

“We need proof,” I said, smirking. “The tail will do.”

He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and nodded, kneeling at me side.

“If you can’t handle it, look away, okay?”

The heavy footsteps of Joey’s boots made me look up again, and he was taking the stairs two steps at a time. He held a pistol in his hand, the same one we kept on the navigation deck in case something went wrong. You never knew what might happen when you were in an ocean full of sharks and deadly animals.

He held the gun toward me with a deep furrow etched into his brow. “At least kill it first.”

“Why?” I glared at him. “I’m sure the merman who saw my father’s boat overturn didn’t make sure he was dead first before watching him drown.”

Joey shook his head. “For fuck’s sake, Ethan. You don’t remember that night. *Kill* him.”

“I remember enough to know there was a merman there.”

“How do you know it was this one, huh? There’s probably thousands, or more, like him under the water.”

I felt more than saw Boy rise from beside me, but I ignored him, too intent on the argument I was having with Joey. “They are cruel creatures—”

“Because they let your father die, but you don’t remember what happened. All you can remember is one dragging you to shore, *saving* your life. Your anger is irrational.”

I rolled my eyes. “Careful, Joey, you’re sounding more and more like your mother.”

“At least she doesn’t kill people.”

The gun was snatched out of Joey’s hand, and we both watched in shock as Boy pointed the gun at the merman’s head, pulling the trigger. I didn’t know if Joey thumbed the safety off or if Boy did, but either way the sound of a gunshot echoed in the air. The merman’s head jolted and blood oozed out of a hole the size of a bullet.

Boy passed the gun back to Joey with pursed lips and then turned his attention to me, waving at the merman’s tail. He huffed before giving me a smile.

Fuck. He hadn’t even hesitated in killing the merman. I didn’t know why that made my heart slam against my ribs so roughly.

“Jesus Christ,” Joey muttered, turning his stunned gaze on Boy. “You deserve each other. I’m taking this boat home. We’re going back.”

I didn’t argue because I was too busy staring at the mute man in front of me. Standing, I held out my arms, and he grinned, stepping into my embrace. I captured his mouth in a rough kiss, fucking my tongue into the warm cavern. My cock was so hard I thought it would burst from the confines of my pants. I’d never felt so hot and needy, and it took all of my control not to bend him over the side of the boat and fuck him again.

He whimpered into my mouth and shoved himself to his tiptoes, as though wanting more, and while I was tempted to give him that, Joey fired the boat up and I knew he’d be heading to the marina. We had to deal with this merman before we got there, maybe throw his torso over into the water and take only the tail back.

I broke the kiss. “Joey, call the media when we get close enough to the marina. Tell them about what we’ve found.”

Joey didn’t bother to turn to me, but I knew he’d heard me because his shoulders stiffened.

“We’re going to be famous, Boy,” I whispered, before seizing his lips in another short kiss. “Come on, let’s saw this tail off. Clean it up like a fish. I doubt the reporters want to see the dead upper torso.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lyric

As soon as we arrived back at the location where my human usually stored his boat, a crowd waited for us. Something flashed in our direction, and I blinked at my sudden blindness. Ethan held my arms to stop me from stepping back and falling over the edge of the yacht—another word he'd used for his boat, and I smiled at him in gratitude.

"They're reporters," he said, as though that explained everything. I didn't know what *reporters* were, and I must have looked confused because he shook his head in a *don't worry about it* kind of way. I hated that he wasn't bothering to explain it to me. Had I become so annoying already?

When we reached the wooden planks the humans were gathered on, Joey tied the boat up with a rope as Ethan gestured me to follow him off. He'd grabbed Ribbins' tail that he'd since wrapped in cloth before carrying it over the gangway. I trailed after him because there was nothing else I could do.

The humans pushed at each other and something flashed at us again, and I blinked at the whiteness that filled my vision. It took me a moment to realize they were holding something in their hands, something I'd never seen before. That's what was flashing.

Joey grabbed my shoulder, steadying me, and I turned to smile in thanks. He looked grim, as though he would rather not be here, and I didn't quite understand that, either. He'd wanted to find the merfolk, hadn't he?

"Mr. Turmont! Is it true you found a mermaid?" a woman asked abruptly, sticking something long in Ethan's direction just as he lowered the wrapped tail onto the wood.

My human smiled, and I felt my heart thump so wildly that I couldn't breathe for a second. His handsomeness never failed to stun me. He was perfect in every way.

"I wouldn't say *mermaid*," Ethan said with a laugh.

The humans gathered around him moved in closer, flashes of light coming from the devices in their hands, and more long objects were shoved in his direction. I recognized a few of the faces behind the crowd of humans, and the sight of one of the females made my gut twist. I could never forget her because she'd been there the night I saved Ethan. She'd smiled at him, and I'd never forget the emotion I'd experienced that night, the twisted agony that made me feel sick. She'd been beautiful and *human*.

The way she smiled now gave me that same feeling, and I gnashed my teeth together. I didn't want her anywhere near my Ethan, but I didn't miss the way he stared over the heads of the other humans to her and smiled.

Gut churning, I made to step forward, but Joey grabbed my arm, dragging me past the crowd. I fought against his hold, but it was useless. He was a lot stronger than I gave him credit for and without the ability to scream in rage, I was useless. Any noise I did make was quiet compared to the questions thrown at Ethan.

I struggled harder as we strode past the girl, but Joey kept a firm grip on me as he dragged me farther away from the boats until we were on land, and then he shoved me onto the cement. I hissed at him, and he glared back at me.

"This is his chance. What he was willing to kill for," he said as he kneeled in front of me. His eyes sizzled with fury and it looked strange on a man I'd only known as carefree and funny. "What he got *you* to kill for."

I swallowed and pressed my lips together. He had no idea the torture Ribbins put me through, the constant teasing and injuries. Killing him for my human had been easy.

"Those reporters out on that jetty? They've always thought he was crazy like his father. This is his chance to make it right. Now that he's finally doing it, maybe he'll stop with his obsession of proving everyone wrong."

I stared out at the… jetty longingly. Ethan was out there with a pretty female. It's where I should be, too, showing her that he belonged to me.

Joey shook his head, a strange smile curling his mouth. "But he's not the only one with an obsession, is he? You've barely known him for a few days and you'd do anything for him."

I cocked my head at him.

He snorted and stood, and I stared up at the gentle lines of his body. His arms weren't as wide or as hard as Ethan's, and I supposed he was good-looking for a human, but he wasn't my human and never would be.

"Stay here until he's done." And then he was gone, walking away from where he'd dumped me, his long legs carrying him quickly.

My attention returned to Ethan and whatever he was saying to the reporters. He gestured to the tail wrapped in a bedsheet before he bent down and opened it for the crowd. I couldn't hear what was being said, but there was a humming as they shuffled closer to try get a look of their own.

I sighed and pushed to my feet. Taking a seat on a bench that had been built near the rolling waves of the peer, I watched Ethan. And watched him some more. And more. I didn't know how long I stayed there before the reporters were obviously done, packing away their equipment and leaving. Ethan wasn't finished, though, because the pretty female finally took her chance, moving toward my human.

Anger twisted inside me, and I forced myself to glance away and stare at anything but them. It didn't matter what I stared at because it wasn't enough to distract me, and my gaze wandered back to them. She had her palm on Ethan's chest, her black hair fluttering in the wind as she said something, and he laughed.

I ripped my attention away and stood, hands curling into fists at my sides. Taking a deep breath, I paced the pier for what seemed like forever until I heard his voice.

"Hey, Boy, help me with this."

I stopped and turned, staring at him and the tail he was trying to hold in his arms, again wrapped in the sheets. The fins were hanging out from the bottom. He grunted because the tail was heavy, but they were meant to be. We used our tails to fight off predators like sharks.

I wished I could ask him what *she'd* said, but all I could was nod and grab the end of the tail. We carried it down the pier, ignoring the strange looks we got from people who passed us. He led me to a group of human vehicles until we reached a red one with only two seats and what looked to be a space in the rear to store stuff.

"Let's get it in the bed," he said, and I realized he was talking about his vehicle.

Together, we lifted the tail over the sides and into the back. I huffed when we finally got it in, but he wasn't done. He jumped into the bed and grabbed some rope, securing the tail to one side.

"We need to hurry and get this home, put it in the freezer. Guess it's like any fish, and it'll start rotting soon." He jumped down and guided me around to the passenger side, yanking the door open and then gestured at the seat. I pushed myself up into the truck before he closed the door again and went to his side.

We drove in silence, me staring out toward the ocean and the rolling waves. Something unfamiliar twisted inside me, and I thought about my brothers and father and Grandfather. How did they feel about me being gone? I missed them, no matter how much I'd wished to be on land. They loved me.

"We're here," Ethan announced, and I glanced through the glass at where he was talking about. It was a little house of some kind, made of wood that reminded me of the boats that had been shipwrecked underwater. While it looked worn down, it also looked… homey with some kind of chair out front on a little patio and a tiny garden at the steps. "It's not much, but it's by the ocean, and I spend a majority of my time on the boat anyway."

I turned to look at him with a frown and then smiled and leaned forward. He froze, and so did I, my stomach twisting in concern. Now that he had a chance with his female, that was it for us? I wouldn't let it be done. Joey was right. I'd killed for him.

To my relief, though, he captured my mouth in a rough kiss, and I groaned against his lips. He ate at me, and I let him, because it wasn't just my stomach stirring now, but my *cock* too.

When he pulled back, it was too soon and I groaned. He smiled and winked, and said, "Come on, help me get the tail to the freezer."

We moved the tail from the back of the truck to what he called a freezer, which was a long white *thing* that he opened the lid of and was so cold it made me shiver. Ice lined the insides. I'd never seen anything like it, and my confusion must have been evident because he laughed.

"If we don't put it in here, the tail will rot and it'll smell to high heaven, and I want to keep the proof."

We settled the tail on the edge, and together we unwrapped the bedsheet before lowering it inside with what looked to be fish.

“There were scientists at the press conference who wanted to take the tail to test it, but I refused to let them,” he said when he’d lowered the lid. He turned to me, eyes blazing in a way that made my skin prickle with goose bumps. “This is my only proof that my father wasn’t crazy. I’m not letting them have it.”

I cocked my head at him and nodded. When he spoke like this, I never understood. His words were garbled and nonsense to me, but he could say anything and I’d believe him.

His gaze narrowed on me, and I wrung my hands together, chewing on my bottom lip.

“You *are* pretty,” he whispered, and my cheeks grew hot. When he cupped my face, my eyes slipped closed automatically, and he brushed his mouth against mine again, but this time it wasn’t as hard or as rough, and he pulled away too quickly. “I have an idea. Go inside the cottage, wait in there until I get back.”

My eyes flashed open, but he was already walking to the front door and pushing some kind of key into a lock. I only knew what the key and lock were because I’d found some that were similar, and they were currently in my treasure box. Throwing open the door, he gestured inside.

“Go.” He gave my ass a slap on my way past him, and I watched him get back into the truck. I couldn’t do anything but stare at the back of Ethan’s vehicle as he drove away. Chewing on my lip, I walked inside the house like he’d told me to do and stopped as soon as I passed the door. Inside was as homey as the outside.

There was wood everywhere, even the furniture was made out of it. I wondered if that was a human thing or an Ethan thing. Photos hung on the walls, and as I stepped closer to them, a familiar face stared back out of one. Ethan’s dad, the same man I’d seen drown. He stood there with a smile, his arm wrapped around what looked to be the child version of Ethan. They both had smiles on their faces, and the way they stood so closely together reminded me of Dad and myself. That sick feeling started again and I rubbed my belly. There was no use being homesick now because this place with Ethan was my *new* home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ethan

It wasn’t difficult to find what I was searching for, even if I did get a few weird looks when I bought it. That came with the territory for being a Turmont. We were the crazies of the town, the ones who believed in merpeople. But fuck it, I’d proven I was right today, and those journalists ate it up. They loved me.

I winked at the employee of the clothing store as she rang up the items, and she huffed at me. By the time I was back in the truck and heading home, I was beyond excited. I’d never expected to enjoy being with a man, but Boy was something else. He wasn’t just an ordinary dude, he was so fucking pretty, and the thought of sticking my dick into a pretty dude like him had me hard as a rock.

Luckily the drive home was short, and those kinds of trips were one of the only good things about living in a small town. By the time I got through the front door, Boy was sitting on the couch and staring at the blank TV with a confused expression on his face. He tilted his head from side to side, his reflection looking back from the television screen.

I snorted and dropped the shopping bags on the couch beside him. Jumping in surprise, he glanced over his shoulder and grinned.

“I bought you something.” Walking around the couch, I dropped onto the cushion beside him and opened one of the bags, pulling out a deep red knee-length dress, and then I passed it to him.

Boy took the garment from me, drawing the material between two fingers to feel it. He frowned from the dress to me, and I smirked.

“You wear it.”

A creased formed on his forehead as he took the time to explore the dress before he pushed himself to his feet. He slid off his shoes and socks,

and worked the T-shirt he was wearing over his head. I settled onto the couch, my cock throbbing in my pants as I enjoyed the show he gave me, one that he clearly didn't know he was putting on. But when he tugged down his pants and underwear, his dick springing free from the confines, my own cock felt like it was about to explode.

I cupped myself through my pants as he flipped the dress in his hands, as though trying to figure out how he was supposed to put it on, and I stood. "Here, let me help."

Together, we got it on him, and it barely reached the middle of his delicious, pale thighs. Knowing he didn't have any underwear on under that dress had my balls hurting, and I groaned when I ran a hand up the back of the material, squeezing his ass.

He smiled, obviously pleased that he'd made me happy.

"There's more." I went back to the bags and upturned them, dumping the rest of my buys onto the couch. There were black stockings, red high heeled shoes, which I thought would fit him, and lipstick and eyeshadow.

He shifted closer, the dress swaying around his strong thighs, and it took all my effort not to throw him over the couch and fuck him right then and there. I wanted to get him dressed before I did that, though my cock ached in protest.

"I'll help you." I grabbed the stockings first. "Sit on the couch."

He did as instructed and that was sexy in and of itself. The fact that he followed my orders so easily, as though he'd done it his entire life, fueled my desire and my cock throbbed so much that I thought I'd come in my pants without even touching myself.

I kneeled in front of him and ripped open the package with the stockings. Rolling one of them out, I grabbed his foot and rested it on my knee before I positioned the stocking at his foot. I rolled it over his leg, and he cocked his head, interest filling those beautiful blue depths. Once I did the same with the other, I ran my hands over his legs, the feel of the mesh beneath my palms sparking lust low in my stomach. *Fuck*. I was going to enjoy every second of this.

"Shoes next."

The high heels were a little big on him, but not so much that he'd trip over them, and they suited his wide feet so perfectly that I couldn't help but lean down and lay a kiss on his stocking covered right foot. I breathed out,

my cock throbbing so hard now that I swore I *heard* the sound of the blood in my ears.

"Makeup," I mumbled, though I wasn't sure if he could hear me. Nearly stumbling to my feet, I readjusted myself in my pants, and Boy's gaze followed the movement. His smile made my heart crash against my ribs. He was going to be the death of me.

I sat on the couch next to him again and cupped his jaw. "Fuck, you're gorgeous like this." Dragging him into a rough kiss, I fucked his mouth until his hips were humping toward me and his dick was making a tent in the front of the dress. I laughed. "I know the feeling."

Placing the makeup on him was harder than I'd imagined. The lipstick kept going over the edges of his lips and I had to use his discarded shirt to fix it, but after a few mistakes, we finally had it right. We had the same problems with the eyeshadow, but in the end it was worth it. Boy was beautiful to begin with, but with women's clothes and makeup? I thought I'd bust any minute.

"Stand up in front of me, let me see you." I sat back on the couch as Boy went to his feet, nearly stumbling over the high heels in the process. It took him a few seconds before he had himself steady and was standing in front of me. He pulled at the bottom of the dress nervously, but it was enough to let me see a peek of his cock beneath. "Fucking hell."

There was no way I could stand it any longer. I wanted to come inside him and *now*. Fingers shaking, I worked at the button of my jeans until I had it undone and the zipper pulled down. I yanked at the waistband and shoved them to my knees. I took off my shirt, too, and threw it somewhere behind me. Past me was smart enough to have packets of lube in my pockets, so all I had to do was grab one out of there and rip it open, squeezing the liquid onto my slab of meat.

"Christ, come sit on my cock. Fuck yourself on me."

Boy licked his lips and stumbled a little when he stepped closer. I curled my arm around his waist, yanking him onto the couch with his knees on either sides of my thighs. Reaching behind him and under his dress, I shoved a finger into his tight little hole, and like the good little whore he was, he whimpered and fucked himself on my digit.

"Yeah, you little fucking bitch. Hungry for my cock, aren't you?"

He moaned, and I took that as a yes. I captured his lips with mine and fucked his mouth like I wanted to do to his ass, and his fingers dug into my

shoulders in a way that had spikes of pain emanating from that area. I was going to have nice little bruises there after we were done.

There was no way I could wait any longer. I needed him *now*. Grasping at the base of my cock, I lined it up with his asshole and pushed in, hard. He groaned loudly in a mixture of pain and pleasure and wrapped his arms around my neck, his chest flat against mine. His tightness overwhelmed me, the warmth teasing me, and I was teetering on the edge of exploding. It took all my effort not to thrust into him once and have it all be over.

I slid my hands under the dress and gripped his hips while I spread my legs to get into the best position to piston myself into him. The fucking was rough, and he bounced on my cock like a good little slut, moaning and whimpering and throwing his head back with his bright red lips open needily.

“You like my cock don’t you?” I hissed, nails digging deeper into the skin of his hips. “You like the feel of me spreading you apart, fucking you until I fill you with my cum. You dirty little whore.”

He whined, chewed on his bottom lip, and leaned in to kiss me. His makeup was already ruined, the lipstick a mess across his mouth from the amount of times we’d kissed, and it was so dirty. I fucking loved it. He was tighter than any woman I’d been with, and I felt like his asshole was strangling my cock, but in all the right ways.

“Come on, Boy, show me what you got. Take over.” I let go of his hips, but like a good bitch, he knew exactly what he had to do. He continued to ride me, jamming his hole down on my cock, and I knew I was getting close by how raw my balls felt. My orgasm was like a fire exploding through my body, all hot and needy, and with one final thrust up into him, I groaned and shot my load into his tight hole.

I quivered through my release until I was boneless and it felt so fucking amazing. Spitting into my hand, I reached under his dress and jerked off his fat dick, and like a good boy, he arched into me and it didn’t take him long to come, too. Spunk shot from his slit, some caught on the dress, but most of it landed on my sweaty chest.

“Fuck.” I laughed and cupped the back of his neck, dragging him down for another toe-curling mouth fuck as he trembled against me. “You’re so hot. Better than anyone with tits and a pussy.”

His eyebrows furrowed, but he smiled and kissed along my jaw.

“You’d do anything for me, wouldn’t you?” I asked, stroking my fingers down the back of the dress and sliding them under to grab a palmful of his ass again.

He nodded, flicking his blond hair off his sweaty flushed cheeks. His hole squeezed around my half hard cock, and I groaned.

“Were you jealous of Amber, the girl at the jetty today?” I’d seen the way he kept glancing at us, and I’d let her flirt with me just so I could see his reaction. After having Boy, I didn’t need to chase her pussy anymore. I had no reason to. Boy let me fuck him better than any woman could.

He sniffed.

I laughed, cupping his cheek. “You have no reason to be jealous. Your hole’s the only one I’m fucking.”

Boy stared at me intently and then he smiled, and it was the kind that had my cock twitching in his hole as it attempted to get fully hard again.

“Would you kill her if I decided to fuck her, though?” I asked, curious just how much he’d do for me.

He pursed his mouth, the lipstick smeared around the edges, and finally nodded with a determined stare.

I shook my head and ran my fingers over his scalp, making him moan. “You don’t need to. Let’s leave the killing for the mermaids, huh?”

Boy hummed and snuggled up against me, and I kissed his temple. My cock was still inside his hole, but neither of us went to move, and I was okay with that. I reached over for the TV remote control and then switched it on. The sound startled Boy.

“Shh.” I ran a palm over his head and he settled again, burying his face into my neck as I turned the channels to one I knew the local news would be on. The familiar face of Lucy Aden, a popular news reporter, came up on the screen, and I grinned.

Once upon a time, I’d imagined the day when I’d finally found a mermaid and showed the proof. In my dreams, she was astounded and intrigued, and after an on-camera interview, we went back to her room where I fucked her silly. When I met her today, she wasn’t impressive to me. Beautiful? Sure, but not *lose my breath because I want to stick my dick in her* gorgeous. Not like Boy.

“So tell me, Lucy, what were your thoughts on Mr. Turmont?” the anchorman asked from the newsroom, smiling toward the camera. He was on one side of the screen, and Lucy was on the other, standing on the pier

with the night sky gleaming behind her. She smiled, her light pink lipstick making her already pale face look even paler. Her long brown hair fluttered around her shoulders with the wind, and she had on an ash dress that followed the curves of her body perfectly, but I'd learned today that she was bland and boring, her questions no more unique than any of the other reporters.

"Well, Tony, I can say that Ethan Turmont did bring us some proof of a tail, guts and all." She chuckled, and I felt the familiar frustration growing inside me, the sound of her laugh mocking. "However, maybe the rumors are true and Mr. Turmont is as mentally unstable as his father."

"Why do you say that?" Tony asked.

Lucy smiled sardonically and the irritation in my gut grew to full rage. Fucking bitch. "Well, the proof produced was a tail with scales, and let's be honest, that could be from a fish. Mr. Turmont *was* out in the ocean and has been going out on his boat regularly. We've talked with a few men who've worked for Ethan, and more than one has said he's good at catching the larger breeds of fish. When asked by scientists if they could take the specimen and test it, Ethan refused, which has brought about suspicions among the community. If it's real, what does he have to hide?" She laughed again, and this time Tony joined her. "Local residents agree that Mr. Turmont's family has been known for a history of mental illnesses. While the tail was bigger than a usual fish's, that doesn't mean he couldn't have caught a bigger than average fish and claimed it to be a mermaid, when it in fact, wasn't."

Boy sat up and finally moved, letting my now soft cock slide out of his hole. He turned to sit his ass on the couch right beside me, our thighs touching. My focus was on the news, though, as more than just rage filled me—disappointment, too. I'd kept the tail because I'd been scared that by giving it away, I'd never see it again, and the truth that my father hadn't been crazy would have disappeared with it.

The more the interview went on, the sicker and angrier I felt to the stomach. They made fun of my father, and me, and then went into my family history, mentioning my mom's drowning, until I couldn't take it anymore and switched off the TV, throwing the control straight at the screen. It wobbled with the force of the hit, but nothing broke.

Boy cuddled against my side, but not even that helped the rage that overwhelmed all my senses, and I shoved him off, standing and yanking my

pants up. I didn’t bother to zip the jeans before I stalked out the front door of the house and down to the beach where the rolling waves crashed against the sand dunes. I breathed heavily, and my blood felt hot, as though fire waged war inside me. The cool breeze didn’t bother me.

Arms curled around my waist from behind, and I stiffened, but let Boy press against my back, his chin on my shoulder.

I huffed out a ragged breath. “I didn’t let them have the tail because it was the only proof I had,” I murmured, squeezing at his hands which he’d linked across my stomach. “My father was not crazy.”

Boy kissed my naked shoulder and stroked my belly, close to the trail of hair that tracked down to my cock.

“How fucking dare they?” I shook my head and imagined it was Lucy fucking Aden’s body I’d chopped up instead of the merman’s. She deserved it.

Only one thing made sense: I needed to bring back more proof, one that they could take away and test. How long had it taken me to find this merman, though? How long would it take us to find more?

“We need to go back out,” I said, turning in Boy’s arms and grabbing his face between my hands. I tilted his chin back and stared into his rounded face and flushed cheeks, or what little of it that the moon’s light let me see. He’d taken off the heels, but he still wore the stockings and dress, which seemed to glimmer under the glow of the moon. “We need to find more mermen, give them all the proof they need. Maybe keep one alive.”

He stared up at me and took my hands into his. He kissed the back of one and then did the same to the other, and nodded.

“Joey probably won’t come,” I said, frowning down at him. “He was pretty pissed off about what we did today. Never saw him that angry, to be honest.”

Boy worried his bottom lip between his teeth, and shook his head, pointing at himself. He didn’t speak, because he couldn’t, but he mouthed a word I understood. “*Me*.”

“You?”

He nodded again, raising his chin in determination.

“You want to go out with me and hunt them?”

He curled his arms around my neck and dragged me closer, kissing me on the lips. If he’d been anyone else, I would have told them to fuck off,

that I didn’t kiss outside of sex, but something inside me craved him with a weird sense of need that had some of my anger seeping away.

“You really would do anything for me,” I whispered, and Boy smiled. “Okay. We’ll go out first thing in the morning.”

He seemed satisfied with that because he flashed me his straight white teeth. I dragged him as close as I could, wrapping my arms around his slim body and burying my face against his shoulder. Breathing him in, I sighed. *Fuck*. This could get dangerous very quickly. It was one thing to fuck a man, but another to let that same man be so close to me. Not even the women got that luxury. Yet, I wanted him in the bed beside me, although I kind of wished I’d bought him silk pajamas to sleep in now. Maybe some lingerie too.

“Let’s go to bed. We need all the sleep we can get.”

I led him back into the house, and like the good slave that I felt like he was, he let me take him to the shower. We bathed together, and I washed his back and chest before he did the same to me. The entire affair felt domestic and the thought made my stomach clench.

When we got into bed naked, Boy cuddled close to me and rested his head on my chest. His legs entangled in mine, and I let him get close because I enjoyed the warmth more than I should have. We fell asleep like that, entwined as though we were one person instead of two.

CHAPTER NINE

Lyric

Two months and nine days. That's how long I'd been with Ethan, how long we'd searched for another merperson for the proof he needed, and we'd gotten nothing. We went out weeks at a time and only spent a few days back on land before we left again. Joey called my human sometimes, but Ethan never took the phone calls. I didn't know why, and I couldn't ask questions. He'd taught me how to write and the words weren't much different to what we'd been taught underwater, but instead of writing on walls with squid ink, we wrote with pen and paper. My mind automatically gave me the right spelling to words, and I assumed that came as part of the deal I'd made with the witch to be human.

So when I needed to communicate with Ethan, I did it by writing him letters, and I made sure to write him one every morning when he woke. The smile he gave me had been worth the effort, and as each day went by, the more I found myself… in love? Joey had called it obsessed, though, and I didn't understand what that meant.

Ethan and I had sex every day, and I learned more things when it came to the act of human intercourse. We used toys to stimulate us, too. He loved it when I dressed in what I knew now as female attire, with dresses, stockings, makeup and heels. The shoes were hard to walk in at first, but I'd quickly learned how to keep myself upright. When we weren't fishing for merfolk, I wore those sorts of clothes for him.

Today we had a break on the boat, and I was wearing his favorite dress, the navy blue one that barely reached the middle of my thighs and was tight against my hips. It's what I called a body hugger, and it only had two thin straps on my slim shoulders. The snugness meant my cock was visible while it was hard in my lingerie, and Ethan's gaze ate the sight up.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he murmured from where he sat on the bench at the side of the boat. He had his legs spread, his jeans unbuttoned, and his rock-hard dick sticking out from it. With his hand wrapped around his flesh, he jerked himself off slowly. “Come here. I want to feed you, Boy.”

I licked at my lips, where I’d smoothed on cherry gloss. My heart hammered against my ribs as I shifted forward. The rocking boat meant walking in heels was a little more difficult, but the shoes weren’t as high as normal, and I liked to think I was mastering them.

I stopped when I reached him, and like the good bitch I was, I slid to my knees and placed my hands on my thighs, waiting for his orders. He jerked himself off faster, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his thick meat as my mouth watered. I wanted him in my between my lips, his cum shooting to the back of my throat.

“Have you been a good boy?” he murmured, running his thumb over the slit of his dick.

I whimpered and nodded, peering up at him pleadingly.

“Do you deserve this?” My human waved his cock in my direction, and I nodded again, moving my hands to squeeze his thighs pleadingly. He laughed and reached up to run his hand through my hair, and my eyes slipped closed. “You’re right, you have been a good boy. Take it. It’s all yours.”

I moaned in gratitude and took the head of his dick in my mouth, suckling gently at first, before sliding it farther in. The first time I’d sucked it, I didn’t know what to do, but he’d encouraged me and taught me what he liked, and now I could imagine myself with his dick in my mouth at all hours of the day.

Wrapping my hand around the base, I gripped the hard flesh tightly and took most of it into my mouth, sucking and licking and listening to the small groans he gave me as praise. He tugged at my hair, fingers twisting into my blond strands.

“Good boy. Such a fucking good boy.”

I stared up at him from beneath my lowered eyelashes and moaned in gratitude. He knew I loved it when he told me how good I was for him.

He smiled and my heart stuttered. “My favorite little bitch,” Ethan murmured, his voice deeper and grittier. “You’re such a good cocksucker. Bet you’d love your gut filled with my cum, huh?”

I hummed as I licked the head. My tongue dug into the slit, and he groaned, long and deep.

“Fuck, yeah. So fucking good.”

Excitement burned inside me, and I kissed my way down his dick to his balls. Lapping at them, I took one into my mouth, sucking the way he always enjoyed, before I did the same to the other. My own cock filled out the panties I wore, throbbing with a need I always felt when it came to Ethan. I wanted him so badly that it hurt.

“You can touch yourself,” he whispered, and I moaned in appreciation as I yanked at the panties’ waistband, freeing myself. I wrapped a hand around my dick, stroking, as I took him back into my mouth. Ethan’s grip on my hair tightened and he fucked up into me, his cock hitting the back of my throat. I gagged, and he did it again and again until I had to force myself off so I didn’t choke.

I panted and grinned up at him.

“Want me to feed you, my dirty whore?” he growled out and stood to his feet. Spreading his legs, he waved his cock at me again, and I shuffled closer, opening my mouth. Jerking himself off, I knew when he edged close to orgasm because his grunts got louder. I stroked myself at the same pace as him, but he came first this time. Spunk shot from his slit, painting my face and tongue.

Moaning, I swallowed it down like the good slut I was before my own release hit me harder than I expected. Stars danced in front of my closed eyes as I stiffened, pleasure and need ripping through me fast. My erection twitched and cum shot from me, covering my fist and the boat floor in front of my knees.

“Fuck yeah,” Ethan whispered, petting my face. He wiped at his cum on my chin with his fingers, and then he showed me what he’d gathered before holding it out to me like a present. I opened my mouth, sucking on his digits eagerly and moaning. “Look at you, so fucking beautiful. Better than any woman.”

I groaned in appreciation. The way he talked to me always made my body tingle. Swallowing down what he offered, I poked my tongue out to show him it was gone, and he laughed.

He slipped his hands under my armpits and lifted me to my feet and up higher. I curled my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, using him as leverage while he held me by the ass. He walked toward the

steps that led down to the rooms inside the boat, and all I could do was hold on while placing kisses along his jaw and his neck. The taste of sweat lingered on his skin and it was perfect, like the rest of him.

Ethan took me into the bedroom, but we bypassed it as he carried me into the connected bathroom. It was small, with a glass shower in the corner, a toilet, and a basin, but still luxurious in whites and blues. Diamond tiled floors extended halfway up the wall in the shower.

He finally sat me down and slanted his mouth against mine, and I kissed him back eagerly. “You make me wild,” he whispered, dragging his fingers over my neck and pressing down on my windpipe.

I gasped as my lungs squeezed, searching for air. When he tightened his grip, I grabbed his shoulders and closed my eyes, my breaths becoming harsher and ragged.

“Tell me what you’d do for me?” he murmured, leaning in closer so his lips were inches from mine. “Tell me how much you want me.”

I tried to smile, but it became harder with the inability to breathe. A burning sensation started in my lungs, and I thought maybe I’d die this time. The first time he’d done it, I thought he was trying to kill me, until I realized it made him happy, so it made me happy too. I mouthed, “Anything.”

That seemed to satisfy him because Ethan smirked and released his hold. “Good boy.”

I inhaled deeply and coughed, rubbing the base of my throat. Pushing myself on tiptoe, I slammed my mouth against his, and he grabbed my face, kissing me roughly until my lips hurt and I was whimpering against him.

“Get in the shower,” he ordered gruffly, and I smiled, following his directions like I always did. I stepped past the glass door and twisted the knobs until warm water cascaded down on me. I always found it too hot, but that’s how my human liked it, and I only enjoyed what he did.

Ethan stepped in behind me, and I shifted until he had his back to the spray. He sighed, moaning, and my cock gave a valiant attempt at getting hard again, but we’d fucked so many times over the last few days I didn’t think I had it in me. It didn’t stop my body from *wanting* him, though.

He passed me the cloth and soap from the ledge behind him, and I slathered it up and made a twirling motion with my finger. When he turned around, I took a moment to admire the lines of his back, sleek and muscular,

from the base of his neck to the heels of his feet. His asscheeks were particularly an interesting spot to stare at.

He laughed, his shoulders shaking. “Stop checking me out, Boy, and wash me down.”

I huffed, but smiled even though I knew he couldn’t see it. Sliding the cloth over his back, I took my time getting to every crevice and groove of his tight body, taking particular interest between those cheeks that made me lick my lips. He tensed whenever I touched a sensitive spot, and it was like watching an entertainment show put on just for me, and my gaze ate up every movement he made.

We spent the next half hour in the shower, bathing and enjoying the hot water until it started to turn cold, and then Ethan guided me out and grabbed us a towel.

“Come on, we have work to do,” he said as he wrapped the towel around his waist and walked into the bedroom. I watched him yank out clothes from the wardrobe, throwing some at me. Everything I wore, everything I did, was chosen by him, and I was perfectly fine with that. I was his slave in every way, and I relished the feeling of being *his*.

Once we were dressed, we went back to the deck again, and we did what we always did. Hunted. Ethan would go to the navigation deck, and I would stay on the bottom, staring out at the endless waves of the ocean, which rocked the boat in an almost calming way. I enjoyed being on top of the sea as much as being under it, and over time, the closeness to the water soothed my homesickness. I still missed my family, but Ethan was mine, and I preferred to be with him.

Since our last trip, he’d had a new and improved gadget added to the boat. He explained it to me, though I didn’t think I fully understood it. A mechanical arm was attached to the back of the boat now which held the same sort of net I’d caught Ribbins in, but it had more force than what a human could produce, or at least that’s what Ethan said.

“I don’t know how you caught that last merman. He was fucking strong.” He’d laughed when he was showing his new tool off to me.

I didn’t know, either. Ribbins’ face still flashed in my mind sometimes, the horror and realization that he’d been caught and this was the end of his life, and when I thought about it, I smiled.

“Hey!” Ethan’s sharp voice shocked me out of my thoughts, and I shot around to stare at him as he came stumbling down the stairs, nearly tripping

over his own feet. “We got something. From starboard. Coming in fast. Definitely not a shark.”

I spun to the side of the boat while Ethan gripped a screen securely in his hands, the same one that controlled the mechanical arm. He tapped at the control furiously and the arm moved, buzzing as it turned in the direction Ethan pointed out to me. *Starboard*. That’s what he called it.

“Fuck, they’re coming in quick. Two shapes. Do you think it could be them?”

I didn’t know, but if they were mermen, they’d react better to me than Ethan. They’d know me. I grabbed the edge of the boat and leaned over it, gaze searching for something—anything—that told me it was one of my people.

The arm buzzed again as it moved around farther, and I glanced over my shoulder at it, frowning. That sort of sound would scare them away. As though reading my mind, Ethan stopped it and grumbled about the noise and how even fish would hate it.

I held up my palm to him and then made a down gesture, and he froze. When I made another signal at him—*stay*—I kicked my leg over the side of the boat.

“What are you doing?” He hissed. “You can’t go in the water.”

I smiled in reassurance. He didn’t understand, but I forgave my human for that. Pushing myself off the boat, my legs sliced through the ocean’s surface, and I dipped under the water from the dive. The water was cold, and I bit my lip to hold in a hiss.

Being underwater was like seeing a long lost friend, and my chest swelled as the bubbles stirred around me. I kicked my legs, so different from my tail, and my lungs were already starting to burn. Pushing myself to the surface again, I took a deep gulp of air when I broke through.

“Fuck. Boy, are you alright?” Ethan stared over the side of the boat, his knuckles white from where he held onto it.

I shook my head, water flicking from my hair in the process, and smiled up at him. I waved at the mechanical arm and put my thumb up like he’d done a few times in an *all good* gesture.

He nodded, mouth pressed in a thin line as though he didn’t agree with me being in the water. His expression was confirmed when he said, “Boy, come out of there. A shark will get you.”

Humans didn’t understand sharks. They acted like the animals attacked randomly, but it was only when they were hungry or mistook someone for a turtle. We knew to keep away from swarms of sharks, but even living underwater with them, the chances of being taken were slim.

I held up my palm to him again and dived under the surface, ignoring the last curses he gave me before I couldn’t hear him anymore. It was a strange experience with human eyes. I’d never realized the differences between our sights until now.

I swam deeper into the darkness, and while I’d lasted longer this time, I could quickly feel my lungs burning again. This wasn’t as fun as I’d expected it to be, and I saw why humans needed the equipment to swim beneath the water now.

As I pushed myself up toward the surface again, I stopped halfway there as a familiar outline of a merperson headed toward me. I stilled, and waited with bated breath as my chest began to hurt, and then I saw him. My brother. *Fuck*. Pru.

His eyes widened when he saw me, and he swam closer. He was talking, his mouth moving, but I didn’t understand what he was saying, not under water. I shook my head at him, and waved my arms. He frowned, and I shoved him.

“Leave,” I mouthed at him. “Go away.”

His frown deepened, his hair floating around his head and dancing with the current of the ocean.

I couldn’t say much more, not with the way my lungs felt like they were on fire, and all I could do was kick my feet and head for the surface. Gasping when I finally broke the waterline, I gulped in the air greedily.

My human was still leaning over the side of the boat, his brow furrowed deeper than before. Relief washed over his face when he saw me, though. “Boy, come on. This is stupid. Come up here. Now.”

I shook my head and anger twisted at his lips.

“I said *now*.”

Fear formed a ball in my stomach, but I raised my chin anyway, shaking my head again. I wanted to prove to him that I had this, just like I had it last time. My brother wasn’t going to be a victim, though. It could be anyone but him or the rest of my family.

I sent him an apologetic smile and then I went under again. It was easier for me to ask for forgiveness from him later. Finding another merperson

meant the world to him, and I was going to make that happen.

My brother was gone when I swam deeper, and I couldn't be more thankful. If it was only him, then we'd have to keep looking. I enjoyed spending the time with my human, so I didn't mind the trips we took.

A shape of darkness swam a little farther away from me, and I blinked in that direction. I couldn't see who it was, and I wondered if it was Pru again, but the closer they came I realized the shoulders were too wide to be him.

A few flicks of a tail, and Zolo was in front of me, his face twisted in irritation. I wondered if they were searching for me and that was why they were all out here together. It wouldn't have surprised me. Once before, a mermaid went missing, and our people searched high and low for her until we found her dead body, caught in a human's fishing net. Father had been furious, cursing the human race and their selfishness, while I'd been intrigued by the net and had taken it back with me to my treasure chest.

Like Pru, Zolo said something I couldn't understand, and moments later, Aza was beside him. They conversed with each other and made faces, and I could already imagine what they were saying.

Lyric is useless.

Why isn't he responding?

He's an idiot.

Shouldn't be a prince.

A failure.

The list went on. In that moment, I was glad I couldn't understand them.

I pointed to the surface of the water, which glittered where the midday sun hit it, and they frowned upward. They spoke to each other and then narrowed their eyes on me. I didn't miss the way Aza's gaze trailed down to my legs, his mouth twisted in horror and disgust. Zolo flicked his tail in the direction of the human part of me, nearly hitting my knee in the process, and he scrunched up his nose.

Maybe the witch hadn't told my father where I'd gone and what I'd done for my human.

The familiar burn in my lungs started, and I pushed for the top of the water again. To my delight and surprise, Zolo and Aza followed me. They reached the surface before I did, and my human, the smart soul he was, moved quickly. The two mermen didn't know what hit them until the net was released, and I only had seconds to get out of the way. It got them head

on, and one push of a button on Ethan's screen and the bottom of the net was pulled so they couldn't escape. Zolo and Aza tried, though. They yanked at the rope and kicked with their tails, hoping to break through, but it didn't work.

Once I broke above the water, I could hear and understand everything they were saying.

"What's happening?" Aza hissed, whipping his tail hard against the net.

"Humans! Lyric, help us!"

I smiled and swam toward the edge of the boat, which had a ladder attached, and climbed up. The yells of Aza and Zolo warmed me on the inside, and delight gave me a bounce in my step when I reached the deck. My human was already waiting for me, the biggest grin on his face. He hooted, running toward me and grabbing me around the waist, lifting and twirling me about in excitement.

"Fuck yes, Boy! You did it!" He laughed and kissed me hard on the mouth. The mechanical arm made its buzzing noise as it slowly dragged the net up with the two mermen—my tormentors—kicking and thrashing as they tried to escape.

My focus was on Ethan, though—the way he felt against me, how he smelled, how he laughed in joy. This was a perfect moment. *Our* perfect moment.

I cupped his face and kissed him back as hard as I could.

"Lyric!" Zolo's voice, deep and irritating, couldn't ruin the explosion of need for my human inside me.

"Lyric, *please*. We were searching for you. We'll die without water." At least Aza sounded a little more apologetic, but that's what I expected. They knew what was about to happen, and they knew they were nothing more than prey to Ethan right now. I was their only chance to escape. Except I wasn't going to let that happen. My human deserved to be happy.

They could suffocate for all I cared because they deserved everything they got.

"What do you say?" Ethan whispered against my lips. "We keep one alive as proof, kill the other one and let them take the tail for testing?"

I nodded and glanced over his shoulder at the mermen as the mechanical arm slowly lowered them to the boat's deck. It didn't release the net, but it stopped with a quiet whir as it settled them on the floor.

Ethan turned to look at them, his smile wide and brilliant, and it made him even more handsome. “The one with the gold tail, we’ll take his.”

Aza’s eyes widened and he kicked hard, but it did little to help. “Don’t do this, Lyric. Your father sent us.”

Zolo bared his teeth in my direction. “You’re a seaweed, Lyric. We shouldn’t have wasted our time on you. You were never meant to be one of us.”

“Stop it,” Aza hissed over his shoulder at Zolo.

“Fuck, do you hear this?” Ethan shook his head and laughed. “All this yipping like a dog. Yip, yip, yip.”

I cocked my head toward my human and frowned. Was that what he heard? Yipping? I supposed it made sense that he couldn’t understand them. It worked out well, too, because I couldn’t have him hearing what they were saying about me. I didn’t want to upset him.

“So what do you say, my merman whisperer?” Ethan cuddled me closer and grabbed my chin in a hard grip, slamming his mouth against mine like he wanted to devour me. I let him because I was his faithful slave, his bitch, and his whore. His everything. “Let’s get to work.”

I nodded eagerly.

CHAPTER TEN

Ethan

I wasn't entirely cruel. Okay, I was, but I had my limits, and keeping a merman alive while I sawed off his tail took the entire thing too far, even if I wanted to with the first one we'd caught. Putting a bullet in his skull before I cut the tail made things easier, but hearing the raw scream from the merman next to the one with the gold tail made me feel sick. A small part of me regretted this, but I'd started it, and now the town thought I was an even bigger fool. They'd brought Mom's drowning into the drama, and that was something I couldn't accept. I didn't know how she *really* died, and it had nothing to do with Dad or me.

I looked at the gun in my hand, guilt gnawing at the inside of my chest as I stared at the other merman and the agony on his face, and a part of me thought that maybe these two were more than friends. Family? Partners? Who knew? I couldn't understand a word they were saying.

My boy, on the other hand, kept cocking his head in their direction, like he could understand. I didn't question it. Everything about Boy was a mystery to me. I'd been keeping my eye on missing person alerts around the country, and none came in for him. He still had no name and no identity, which made me think no one missed him. If that was the case, I'd have to think about getting him some sort of fake ID soon. After this was all over, I wanted to leave Florida completely, and I'd grown accustomed to having him at my side, so he was coming with me.

There was more yipping, but this time the remaining merman was focused on my boy, his face pulled in anger. His tail flicked furiously, and the entire show was annoying, so I reacted on impulse, landing a punch on the merman's jaw. His head went flying to the side, and he let out a yell of agony.

“Shut up, you piece of shit,” I hissed at him. I grabbed the rope, tying him to the side of the boat. The last thing I wanted was for him to attack us now that his friend was dead and the tail sawed off. After another punch to the merman’s stomach, I turned to Boy and smirked. Running my hands over his face and figure, I mapped the familiar lines and crevices of his body that I knew well by now.

“You’re so beautiful, Boy.”

He tilted his head toward me, and I captured his mouth against mine, the tangy taste of blood lingering on my tongue as I devoured him like I always did. My cock plumped and my balls already ached. That’s what he did to me. He made me want like no one else had ever before, and I was as obsessed with him as he was with me.

Something hit me on the back, hard, and I spun Boy and me on instinct, and so that it was me who went overboard, landing in the water’s surface with a bellyflop that left me breathless. The world tilted and went black, and when I woke again, my legs felt paralyzed. My arms were weak, and I didn’t know if it was because I’d hit my head or if there was another reason, but my lungs were on fire, and I didn’t know how much longer I’d have before I drowned.

Something pulled at my leg, and I forced myself to *feel* my limbs. I tried to kick, but it was useless. I was too tired and whatever—or whoever—was tugging at me would win. I’d let life take me the same way it’d taken my dad.

Black seeped into my vision, and I gave one final glance up toward the surface, which seemed like a small blip of light now. I was in too deep, and there was no going back.

“WHAT HAVE YOU *DONE*?” A MALE VOICE ASKED ANGRILY. “HE’S A HUMAN. You brought him *here*, Pru, after you took him to the witch to make it so he could breathe and understand us? That act is pure idiocy. I taught you better.”

“Father, Lyric loves him. That much is clear.” This voice was softer and kinder, and I much preferred his.

“And? Your brother chose to be a human. Did you not hear anything the witch told us? He *chose* legs and to lose his voice. That’s not something I

can and will accept. I told your grandfather that letting him go to the surface was a bad idea. Lyric was obsessed with the humans."

I groaned, and the voices quieted. There was whispering I couldn't understand, and when I finally pried my eyes open, the sight sent confusion through me. I blinked twice before I realized that I was definitely still underwater, but my body didn't feel so tired, and I could *breathe*. Was I dead? It certainly felt like I was.

"Are you awake?" the soft voice from before belonged to a fucking merman. I shoved myself to my feet, or at least tried, but I floated because I was underwater.

"What the fuck is happening?" I gasped out, and it was real words as though I was above the ocean and not below it.

The merman reminded me of Boy, with the same pretty narrow face and big eyes, but unlike Boy, he had a tail. I shook my head and touched my chest, just to see if my heart was still beating, and it was.

He held up his palms to me and smiled, and that reminded me of Boy, too. *Fuck*. Maybe I was dead and I really missed him. "You're safe. We're not going to hurt you."

"Safe?" I laughed and even that sounded normal, which shouldn't have been physically possible. Glancing around me, I noticed a few other merpeople, including some women, with shell bras and all. Anyone would think I'd found myself in some kind of cartoon. "Where am I?"

"You're in Atlantia, or close to it. My father wouldn't allow me to take you all the way."

"Do you blame me?" another merman with the same voice as I'd heard spoke before he swam closer, and I realized he was much older, with gray hair and a wrinkled face. He wasn't *ugly*, but he wasn't as beautiful, either. "He's the human who corrupted my son, *killed* our people. A murderer, just like any other human."

I frowned between them and then around at the other merpeople surrounding me. There were ten, at least, and they were all floating in the water, their tails of different colors flicking to keep them upright. Some were women, some were men, and their appearances were differing, like you'd expect of humans. I didn't know what I anticipated if I ever found myself in front of a lot of merpeople, but this wasn't it.

"Your son?" I let my shoes touch the sandy sea floor, and I blinked. My surroundings were light enough that I could see everything, something that

should have been impossible. “How can I see? It should be dark this far down.”

“The witch. He made this possible. You can breathe underwater, speak, and understand us, see what we can see. He basically made you a merman without the tail.” The young merman quirked a smile.

Confusion warred with annoyance as I glared at them. “Witch? This is fucking insane. Take me back, my boy will be looking for me.”

“Your boy?” the older merman snorted. “Do you mean my son, Lyric? He has a name. Do humans not use them?”

“Lyric?” I shook my head and tried to step back again, but walking in water was *strange*, and I hated the feeling. The eyes of the merpeople felt like bullets pointed straight at my chest, and I felt judged. I’d killed two of their people, after all, and another had been tied up. No, not just killed, but I’d taken their tails.

“Yes, Lyric, my son.” The older one rolled his eyes and huffed. “I feel like this is going in circles.”

“Give him time, Father.”

“Time? We do not have that. This human took Lyric and trained him to be a killer. We do not need a court to determine his fate. He deserves death, and as king, I’ll make sure he gets it.” The sneer at the end sounded like a promise, and my instincts told me to fight him. Hell, I’d fight all of them if I had to.

“What would that do?” the younger merman winced when his father turned a mean glare on him. “Father, I love Lyric as much as you, but he would not forgive us if we hurt this human. I don’t know the circumstances behind this situation, but he obviously loves him.”

“Lyric will do what he’s told. He’ll learn to live without this human.”

“He’s old enough to know what he wants, Father. You’ll push him away. Talk to Grandfather, he’ll tell you the same thing.”

“Enough of this!” came another voice from my right, and I turned toward the new stranger that was clearly another family member. He had the same blond hair and strong brow, but unlike the father and son in front of me, this merman’s hair was shorter. He had it sheared close to his head, as though he’d taken a pair of scissors to it. “This is ridiculous. Father, this interrogation won’t amount to anything. If what Pru says is true, and Lyric does love him, we cannot just kill him like the other humans.”

The older man snorted and crossed his arms, brows furrowing as he stared intently at me. “You of all people know how dangerous they are, Wily. You’ve been out there with me and seen the way they take more food than what is required of them. They take and murder for themselves.”

The other man, Wily, swam closer. His tail was emerald like the ones that belonged to the other two, but his had flecks of gray that seemed to sparkle whenever he twisted it a certain way. Now that he was closer, I noticed the scar on his chest, right above his nipple. It was wide and thick enough to look like it came from a blade.

“You taught me to make decisions as the future king, Father, and that’s what I’m doing. If you kill him, Lyric will never return to us. Nay, if anything he would destroy us. He’s always been quiet and secluded, but I fear that he has a monster living inside him that I do not wish to see. If you push him, he will break, and it is not just our lives that we’ll need to worry about. Love will do that to you.” He glanced at me and those haunted eyes felt like a punch to the chest, and even though I didn’t care for these bastards, I still felt something because I *understood* that kind of pain.

“You want us to let him go?” his father said with a shake of his head. “I can’t do that.”

“Nay, Father, I’m not telling you to let him go. We should wait for Lyric because he will follow his human down here.”

“If he is as human as this one, he will not be able to breathe,” Pru said, concern twisting at his mouth.

“He’s coming. The witch has already got him.” Wily straightened his shoulders and shifted closer until his face was near to mine. I didn’t move, too stubborn to show fear to these murdering assholes. I might have been disadvantaged down here, but I wasn’t going to back down, either.

“How do you know that?” Pru asked.

Wily smiled at me and his twisted lips had the same look as his eyes—as though he was a tortured soul looking for a way out. “Trust me, brother.”

“Fine. Take him to the cells,” the older merman snarled with a wave of his hand. “But before you do, let’s give him a little merfolk hospitality.”

“Father—”

He pointed at Wily angrily. “If you want to be king, you’ll shut up.”

I glared at him. “Bring it on, fucker.”

Someone grabbed a handful of my hair, yanking me hard. I didn’t scream. I wasn’t going to give these bastards the satisfaction.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lyric

I broke through the surface of the ocean, panting as my chest rose in short and harsh breaths. I'd been under the water for too long, searching for my human and finding nothing. Zolo's laughter chilled me to the bone, and anger spread through me like a raging fire. I swam to the ladder of the boat and lifted myself onto the deck, my clothes dripping wet and my skin warm from the humid weather and the slowly setting sun that hung halfway in the sky.

I stalked over to the asshole and kicked his jaw as hard as I could. His face flung to the side and blood flew from his mouth and onto the floor of the boat. He cried out and the sound made me shiver in delight. I wanted to hear him scream more, I *needed* him to hurt.

"He's dead," Zolo whispered through whimpers of pain. "Your pathetic little human is dead."

Another kick but this time I made sure to get him in the cheekbone. With his hands tied, Zolo couldn't fight back, and that's what I wanted. Down in Atlantia, I couldn't fight back against him and his group of friends, and now it was his turn to be helpless.

He grunted, and I did it again and again until I'd heard his bones crack one too many times and he lay nearly lifeless on the floor. His chest rising and falling meant he wasn't dead, but I wanted to take the life out of him, finally give him what he deserved.

My hand shook as I walked over to what Ethan called his toolbox. It had an array of weapons, from his saw to knives of all sizes. The one I wanted was a blade I'd always taken a liking too, sharp along both edges. My human had called it a dagger, but I didn't care what it was. I'd always

imagined that this was what would finally take Zolo's life. I wanted to see the fear in his eyes as I slowly took what belonged to me—his last breath.

I turned back toward him and his motionless body, but didn't miss the way his gaze moved toward me. So he still had the strength to look at me? *Good.* I shifted closer, the dagger clutched tightly in my fist until my knuckles hurt. If I'd lost Ethan then Zolo definitely didn't get to live. I'd dump his dead and beaten body overboard.

A whistle stopped my journey toward Zolo, and I paused, frowning. Striding over to the side of the boat, I froze at the sight of the witch out in the water, not far from the edge.

"What did I tell you?" The witch shook his head. "Love is foolish."

I swallowed and didn't say anything—no, I *couldn't* say anything.

He sighed and waved his hand, sparks of magic dancing in the air and hitting me in the chest. I went flying backward, landing on the deck with a hard thump. My shoulder throbbed from where I'd fallen, and I groaned as I sat up again.

"That hurt," I murmured, and it took me a moment to realize I had my voice back. *Fuck.* My voice. I touched my throat and shoved myself to my feet, rushing back to the side to see the witch again. He smirked at me, running a hand over those crisscrossed scars on his face.

"You're welcome," he singsonged.

"Why are you here?" My voice sounded strange. Maybe it was because it'd been so long since I'd talked, but I couldn't remember ever sounding like this.

"To take you to the love of your life, of course." He rolled his eyes at me and waved his hand impatiently. "Come on. He's with your father, and we all know how *he* gets."

I did, but I wondered how the witch did, too. Glancing back at Zolo, I made a quick decision. Ethan was worth more than taking the time to torture Zolo, but that didn't mean I was going to leave him here to escape, either. With the dagger still clutched in my hand, I took two steps over to him and slashed the blade through the air like Ethan had taught me once, and it slid straight across Zolo's neck.

He gasped and gargled and sat up again, his neck splurting out blood. There wasn't a thing he could do about it.

I kneeled in front of him, in the pool of blood at his side, and smiled. "That's from the human lover, *papayah*."

“Lyr—” He wheezed, but I stood and stalked over to the side again.

I jumped back into the water, my feet slicing through the surface first before my body went under, and when I came back up again, the witch was right in front of me, eyes narrowed in thought.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Lyric? The king is furious. Believes this human has corrupted you.” The witch reached for me and then stopped and snatched back his hand. “Is the human worth it?”

“He’s *my* human,” I murmured. “If father has hurt a hair on his head, I will destroy them.”

He smirked and the twist of his mouth pulled at one of the scars on his face. “I like to hear it.”

“And you? Would you destroy them to help Wily?” I asked.

The witch’s smirk disappeared, and his face turned dark with a furious expression. “How did you—”

“It’s not hard to figure out. The way you talked about him before…. The way you talk about love. He used to disappear for long periods of time, but Father never asked him where he went. He trusted Wily. I don’t care what’s happening between you and my brother, though, witch. I want to go to my human.” I swam closer, jaw tight. “Take me to him.”

“You’re a lot like Wily. More than you know. Obsessive about love. Possessive, too.” The witch grinned and reached up to touch my cheek. Magic danced from his fingertips and rushed through me like jolts of human electricity. I gasped as my heart seized, and then the witch was shoving me under the water.

Blackness seeped through me, and by the time I came around again, we were deep in the water, the witch dragging me behind him.

“Are you taking me to my human?” I asked, and then realized I could breathe underwater.

The witch threw a sneer over his shoulder, flicking his tail at me in irritation. “You came around a lot quicker than your human lover,” he said. “Yes, little prince, I am taking you to your Ethan. Your father, too. Be prepared.”

I thought about saying something but kept silent instead. There was nothing else I could say to the witch that would help. The merfolk may hate him, but they chose to use him when they wanted to. He was nothing but a tool to them, like one of Ethan’s knives or a saw. I hadn’t realized until now.

I had to wonder who asked for his help though—Father or Wily. The witch didn't seem like the kind of person to follow my father's orders, king or not.

"What's your name?"

The witch nearly faltered in his swimming, and after a quick glance toward me, he kept moving.

"I only know you as the witch. Surely you have a name."

"I do," he said sharply.

"Tell me. I don't want to be like my father or the other merfolk. I won't call you the sea witch if you have a name."

For a while, I didn't think he'd answer me. The eerie silence of the deep sea was the only thing I *heard* for a long moment before he sighed.

"Taya. My name is Taya, little prince."

"Hello, Taya, I'm Lyric."

He shot me a smile over his shoulder. Maybe the one that the merfolk always wanted me to be afraid of wasn't the scary monster after all. That was the irony, wasn't it? The ones you trusted might have been the real monsters.

It didn't take us long to get to Atlantia, and when we arrived, it was clear to see they were waiting for us. The moment we reached the underwater city's outskirts, the mermen and maids stopped what they were doing to stare at us on the way past. The ones who used to smile at me now glared or cowered. Soon enough, I'd be part of their nightmare stories as the one who abandoned their people to be with a murdering human, no doubt.

The witch—no, Taya—snarled at anyone who looked like they were coming toward us, and like scared guppies, they skittered away. I would have laughed if I wasn't so worried about Ethan.

Taya dragged me toward the castle, and this time the guards didn't greet me with a smile and ask how my day was. They stiffened and pointed their spears at me. I smirked at them in return because there was something exciting about having them afraid of me.

"Welcome to the dark side, Lyric," Taya murmured with a chuckle as he dragged me through the open doors of the castle.

"Can you teach me dark magic then?" I teased in return, and it earned me a wide-eyed glance from him.

"No, not while you have *legs* and are human." He smiled anyway and by the time he'd stopped tugging me behind him, we were in front of my father's throne where he sat, Grandfather floating beside him. Wily and Pru

were on the other side, but they drifted a little farther, which wasn't odd for something as dire as this. Father and Grandfather were the most important merfolk in the ocean.

I didn't bow my head like I once did, merely let myself float to stand on the rocky and sandy floor. Unlike humans, merfolk didn't need to worry about having flooring in their homes, they floated through the water. There was no reason for them to care. Now I had feet, though, and I winced at the feel of the stones on my delicate skin.

"Father." I raised my chin at him.

"What have you done, Lyric?" Father asked, shaking his head. "You have betrayed us."

"Have I?" I smiled and the thrill of standing up to my father sent a spike of excitement through me. "I like to think of it as living my life."

Father's face turned red and he swept up from the throne, pointing his spear at me menacingly. "I didn't raise you to be this way."

"No, but I chose my own path."

Grandfather sighed sadly. He looked older than ever, the lines of his face more prominent and tired. "Killing your own people, Lyric?"

"I killed three who deserved it." I straightened my shoulders and stood how I'd seen Ethan do it more than once when he was faced with those who thought he was crazy. Like him, I wasn't going to be seen that way. "They made my life hell and they got what they earned."

"They were *searching* for you," Father hissed, his mouth curled in disgust. "And you killed them."

I shook my head, refusing to feel an ounce of guilt. Not for them, not ever. "No, they weren't looking for me, they were looking for your praise. They wanted the merfolk to worship them as heroes when they found me. I won't apologize for what I did."

Father jolted back and his hands curled into fists at his side. "Is this what you've become because of this human, Lyric?"

"No," I said without hesitation. "I became this because I wanted this revenge, and Father, if you hurt *my* human, I will destroy Atlantia."

I didn't miss the wide-eyed expression on Wily's face, but it changed to mildly impressed. Pru, on the other hand, looked stunned with his mouth ajar. I couldn't remember the last time I'd ever seen him like that.

"Why would you do this?" Father swam closer, and I raised my chin higher so I could stare up at where he floated in front of me.

“Because I love him and he’s mine, just as I am his.”

He laughed and it sounded cruel and mocking. “Do you think he will love you after finding out who you really are? He didn’t know your name, Lyric, or that you were one of us. His hatred for mermen will stop him from loving you.”

Fear became stuck in my chest, and I swallowed around a lump that formed in my throat. It was a thought I’d considered, and it terrified me, but I’d always thought he’d never find out. I wasn’t going to let that stop me, though. I loved him, even if Father never understood. “If that is the consequence of saving him, I will accept it, Father, but I will not back down. Give me my human, or I will destroy this city.”

He shook his head and glanced at Grandfather, like he’d have answers.

Grandfather frowned at me. “This is not you, Lyric.”

“It wasn’t me, no, but I’ve learned things while being a human, Grandfather. I am not weak or crazy, and I will not be stared down on because of my love for humans. I never realized how weird I was to our people, and how they’d only smile at me because I was their prince. If you take away that title, what was I to them? The….” I smiled. “My human calls it freak. You see, Ethan is a freak to his people, too. They call him crazy, but to me, he’s perfect, and I won’t leave without him.”

“You will *not* be leaving. You are staying here, and the witch will give you back your tail. This is not a request, Lyric, it is an order.”

I laughed, and it startled my father. He jerked back. “You seem to think you have control of me. You don’t. Give me back my human, or I leave now and bring back an army to destroy this place.”

“An army?” Father snorted. “You think you’re powerful, but you said it yourself, the humans think your Ethan is insane. What makes you think they’ll follow you?”

“Because I’ll make them.” I shoved my feet against the ground and floated higher so I was face to face with him. “Try me. See what happens. Ethan’s taught me quite a lot in the time I’ve been with him. He’s taught me to be confident in myself, and I’d do anything for him.”

Father’s nostrils flared, and he raised his hand as though he was going to strike me. Wily shot forward and grabbed his wrist in a tight hold.

“Father, stop!” Wily shot a glare at me, and I backed away. “Do not underestimate Lyric. He is one of us and you know what we are capable of.”

“You mean drowning those humans who were washed off their boats in storms?” I sneered.

Wily shot me a look I knew well by now. Surprise. They were so quick to assume I was innocent to what they were doing, and I hated that. Before Ethan, I hadn’t realized how much I’d disliked it. I’d gone along with their life so easily because I’d thought it was my only option. Well, in Ethan’s words, fuck that!

“You are no more innocent than the humans that you claim are murderers.” The more I spoke, the more confident I felt. I surged forward until I was in my father’s face again. “You’ve probably killed more of them than they have of us.”

My father’s jaw twitched and he shook Wily’s hold off his wrist. “I did what I had to in order to keep you and our people safe.”

I grinned. “No, Father, you murdered because you hate them. Well, I’m one of them now, and the witch, whose name is Taya by the way, isn’t going to change me back. I won’t allow it.” I poked him in the chest, and both Wily and father’s eyes widened comically. “Get my human. Now.”

Grandfather swam forward, but Father raised his palm to him, stopping him from coming any closer. Father huffed. “You want your human so badly, Lyric? You can have him.” He waved his hand and the guards came fast behind me. I hadn’t even noticed them until they had a grip on each of my arms. I struggled, but they were stronger than me. They had to be while living in the ocean with strong currents.

“Let me go!” I hissed, but Father sneered.

“Take him to his human. He’ll be happy in the cell next to him.”

“Fuck off,” I yelled, but I realized none of them would know the meaning of the words. It was so… human. The guards dragged me toward the back of the castle where I knew there was a path that led down into a deeper part of the ocean where Father had specifically put barred cells for the merfolk who gave him trouble. There hadn’t been many over the years because my father was feared. I never understood why they were scared of him, not until the day I saw him drag that human down to drown.

I struggled against the guards’ hold, but there was nothing I could do to win against them. The hardest part about being a human was my lack of strength compared to the merfolk. Beneath the surface, humans didn’t hold the same power as they did.

They opened the door to the cell and threw me in, although I floated back rather than crashed to the floor like I would have on land. I raced forward, but by the time I got to the door, they'd already slammed it closed and locked it.

"Fucking assholes!" I screamed at them.

"So that's how you talk."

I froze at the familiar voice and turned toward the cell next to mine. I couldn't stop the gasp from escaping my mouth even if I'd wanted to. "Ethan?"

He stepped closer, and I chewed on my bottom lip as I got a better look at him. There weren't any words to describe how he looked right now, with his face beaten and swollen, crisscrossed cuts over his face very similar to the ones Taya had. His right eye could barely open and the sight made me sick to the stomach.

"You can speak," he said with a narrowed glare out of the one eye that was open. He wrapped his fingers around the bars between our cells until his knuckles turned white and the urge to vomit worked its way up my throat. This wasn't my human that had fallen off the boat.

"The witch made it possible. He took my voice to begin with." I shifted closer to him, unafraid of him and the anger washing over his face. "Did they do this to you?"

"What do you think?" He sneered.

I flinched away. He'd never spoken to me like that before.

"When were you going to tell me you were one of them, *Lyric?*"

I touched his knuckles, but he jerked them from me and floated back, away from the bars that separated us. "I couldn't speak, how was I to tell you?"

"You could have found a way," he snapped. "You found ways to talk to me about other things."

I hated that he spoke to me like I was one of his enemies, and it didn't settle right with me. Pressing my forehead against the bars, I reached out for him, but he didn't come any closer. "We'll make them regret touching you."

He snorted and ran a hand through his hair before making an annoyed sound at the back of his throat. "This speaking and breathing underwater shit is weird."

"Hopefully you won't need to get used to it," I said, smiling sadly at him.

Ethan laughed and turned to sit on one of the rocks in the corner of his cell. I'd grown so used to seeing him above water, that watching him now through the ocean seemed bizarre, and I didn't like it. His injuries only made it worse and anger coursed through me. I'd make Father pay for ever touching my human.

"It was me who saved you," I whispered, and he jerked his head up again to stare at me. "That day when your boat went down with your father. I saved you. I was watching you when the boat overturned. There was no chance of saving both of you. The choice I made was you."

"You?" He leaned back against the deteriorating stone walls that the cells were built from and huffed out a surprised breath. "You saved me?"

"Yes, as a merman. I saw that *girl* find you, and I wanted to be there when you opened your eyes, but I couldn't. I could barely breathe above water, and I certainly couldn't walk on land." I swallowed around the emotion clogging my throat and glanced away from his angry eyes. "I knew then that I wanted to be with you, and I needed legs to do that. So I went to the witch and made a deal. He took my voice and gave me legs instead."

"Fuck." Ethan sighed and threw his head back, but it didn't have the impact he was probably expecting, not without the gravity that above water had. "You really were obsessed with me."

I smiled and tightened my hold on the bars. Something dug into my right palm but I didn't move. The pain felt good, a reminder that I was human right now. Blood floated from between my hand and the bar, drifting higher and dancing in the water, and I watched it curiously. I'd never bled as a human before.

Ethan shoved himself up and floated toward me, gaze narrowed on the blood, and then to my hand. He didn't come in arm's length of me, though, and emotions warred across his face, as though he was fighting with himself on what he wanted to do.

I pouted at him. "I'm sorry. Your dirty little whore is so sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

His eyebrows shot up, and I didn't miss the twitch of his mouth, even though the bruising swelled his face. Father would regret ever touching my human. "Oh yeah, how?"

"Any way you want me, you can have me. You can fuck me wherever you want, Ethan. You're my human, and I'd do anything for you." I licked

my lips before gnawing at the bottom one. “I love what you do to me. I want you to fuck me like that for the rest of my life.”

“Yeah?” His mouth did stretch into a smirk this time, but he cringed in pain. “Fuck.”

I reached for him again, and he moved closer so I could caress the fresh cuts that stretched across his cheeks, chin, and forehead. Anger stirred low in my gut as I imagined all the ways I was going to make my father pay for this. I would destroy Atlantia if I had to.

“I’m gonna be an ugly asshole now,” he whispered, and I quickly shook my head in response.

“No. You’ll always be handsome to me.” Wrapping my fingers into his shirt, I dragged him closer, which was a lot easier to do in the water. He leaned forward so his forehead nearly touched mine. The only barrier was the steel bars between us. “We’ll destroy them for this. I promise.”

He nodded. “You bet your cute ass we will, Boy.”

I shivered and gasped. “I love it when you call me that. Please, when we leave, I want you to fuck me.”

His laughter startled me. “You really are fucked up. You still like me when I look like this?”

“How could I not? You’re my human.”

Someone cleared their throat, and I turned my head only slightly, keeping my fingers curled in Ethan’s shirt. I glared at Wily, Taya, and Pru, but sighed because as much as I wanted to be angry at all of them, my brothers and the witch were the most innocent.

“What did Father do to my human?” I hissed, baring my teeth at them angrily.

Taya huffed. “What he’s known for. Punishment.” Wily sent Taya a sad expression of his own, and I felt for them. But they weren’t my concern, Ethan was. “You give him a knife, and he’ll cut every traitor or enemy he can,” Taya continued with a grunt.

“Did he do that to your face?” I asked. The patterns were too similar to be a coincidence. Not only did it have the same design, but the depth and cuts were similar too.

Taya laughed. “No. I’m much older than that, though your father learned well off your grandfather, who learned off his father before him. It’s an age old torture that the royal lines have been taught. Ask Wily.”

My brother cringed and nodded. “Father taught me the same method. It’s traditional in every sense of the word. Traitors and enemies are punished this way so they are forever recognized as one.”

Ethan snorted. “Well aren’t you a bunch of lovely fucking people? I think I had the right idea of killing you bastards.”

Wily shrugged. “As far as Father was concerned, it was survival of the strongest.”

“Grandfather let this happen?” I asked with wide eyes. I’d always thought that he’d be against such cruelty because I’d never known him as anything but kind, especially to his grandchildren.

Pru made a noise and blanched. “Grandfather encouraged it. He’s not as we thought.”

Wily swam closer, his tail flicking in irritation. “We need to get you out of here, Lyric. Both of you. Father will come back in for more torture soon enough. He won’t let you go unless you give this human up.”

“And by give up the human, he means your father is going to kill him,” Taya said, before pausing for a second and then continuing. “Actually, your father is one of the cruelest kings I’ve seen in my lifetime. He wouldn’t kill your human. He’d demand you do it.”

“Fuck!” I slammed my hand against the rusted bars and winced as something sharp dug into the heel of my palm. When I glanced down at it I saw another cut had sliced the bottom of my hand, and more blood drifted up and through the water.

“You’ve learned the human language, haven’t you?” Wily said with a frown. “What does fuck mean?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I growled. “You need to get us out of here.”

“Why do you think we brought Taya?” Wily glanced at Ethan from the corner of his eye. “If we do this, Lyric, you must never come back to Atlantia, or even try to find us again. Promise me that you’ll stay far away.”

“Why should we? Ethan and I deserve our revenge.”

“You will not get it,” Taya said, shaking his head. “The merfolk have an advantage down here. We’re stronger.”

“You could give us the same strength,” I said, but Taya gave me an unimpressed purse of his lips.

“Dark magic doesn’t work as a give, give, give method, Lyric. After a while, it’ll ask for something in return. Giving the dark world your voice

was my offer for changing you into a human. As it is, I've already taken too much today and not given back. The darkness will come for its reward."

"What the hell does that mean?" Ethan asked, swimming closer.

"It means that Taya will pay for helping you." Wily sighed. "This is the last time we can help. If you come back again, Lyric, there's nothing we can do for you."

"Is this how it'll always be? Father taking the lives of humans and torturing. Having his own people so afraid of him that they won't speak up."

Pru exhaled and reached for me, touching my hand. "It's how he's always been. We've been naïve to it until now."

"Look what he's done to my human," I hissed, waving at Ethan.

"I will fix the bruising," Taya said, holding up a hand to Wily when he opened his mouth. He smiled sadly at my brother. "It's the least I can do." His gaze switched to me again. "But I cannot heal the scars. They were made with a blade called *Arya*. Dark magic given to the royal line centuries ago. Whatever cuts that blade makes are undoable."

"How?" Pru asked, obviously surprised by the information himself.

Taya shrugged. "*Arya* was born from dark magic long before I was. Stories have said that it came from an evil witch who lived in the same cave as I do, who was killed by the darkness after creating *Arya* and not giving anything in return. One does not always understand the way dark magic works."

"Why do you use it then?" Wily flinched when Taya gave him a sharp glance, and obviously it'd been a conversation they had before.

"We don't have time for this," Taya hissed. "Your father and his guards can come back anytime. We need to get them out of here now."

He didn't wait for any of us to say anything before his hands were moving in the water in familiar circles. I tilted my head to tell Ethan to get back, and we swam away from the front bars of our cells. Taya worked his magic, and soon the rusted steel creaked and bent until it broke and shattered to pieces.

Ethan swam out first, and Taya grabbed his arm.

"Let me fix the bruising."

I shifted closer as the witch used his magic again. I didn't miss the way Wily's hand reached for Taya, almost as though he wanted to stop him, before he snatched it back again. A few seconds later, Ethan's bruises

receded and the freshness of his cuts healed until they were scars. By the time he was done, Taya was panting, his face flushed a bright red.

Wily did grab him then and dragged him closer. They whispered to each other, but I didn't attempt to hear what they were saying. I floated closer to Ethan and touched his face. He didn't flinch, but his mouth curled into a sneer.

"I should gut your father," he growled.

"Shh. I know." He slanted his mouth over mine and kissed me hard, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip. "We need to go."

"Come with us. Now." Wily waved and we swam as quickly as we could. I'd never realized how difficult it was to swim as a human, not until I was faced with racing alongside mermen. One flick of their tail put them in front of us, while we struggled against the gentle current that swept through the dark recesses of the ocean.

My brothers must have realized what a struggle it was because they grabbed our arms and dragged us through the stone hallways created as a castle dungeon. I knew from the few times I snuck down here with Pru that there was a hole in the wall closer to the south exit, and Pru clearly remembered too because that's where we were headed.

We were nearly there when we heard shouts from where our cells were.

"Fuck," Ethan snapped, and I had to agree.

"We need to move quicker," I said.

Wily nodded, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

Taya took the lead, and Wily's grip on me tightened as he hauled me through the hole in the stone and out into the open ocean of Atlantia. Pru did the same for Ethan, and then we were off. The few people out wandering the city stopped to stare at us, and it took all my effort not to give them the finger as we shot past them. It was a human gesture, so they'd have no idea what it meant anyway.

"There they are!" my father's voice boomed.

Taya cursed and turned back. "We need to find a hiding spot. The chances of outrunning them are slim."

"My treasure," I said, kicking my legs as hard as I could. My thighs were already burning, though, and I felt my breath come out rapidly even though we were underwater. "We need to go to the boat where my treasure is."

“Why?” Wily asked as he dragged me through a crowd of merfolk that had gathered near one of the market stalls filled with fish. “Father would know to find you there.”

“It has human possessions. Surely there’d be some kind of weapon we could use if they found us there.”

Wily sent Taya a look, and Taya nodded in answer to whatever quiet conversation they were having with each other.

“Fine,” Wily snapped, and he swam harder.

I glanced back to make sure Pru and Ethan were right behind us, and they were, so I focused on the direction Wily and Taya were leading us. More shouting told me that Father and his guards weren’t far behind, and we wouldn’t have much time to find weapons if we needed them.

When we got to the wreck, my entire body burned with exhaustion. I felt like my limbs were on fire, and I was glad for my brothers in that moment. If there was something I missed about being a merman, it was the strength they—we?—had underwater.

I slipped through the hole in the boat and the others followed me. Ethan frowned at the chest I went to and shifted closer when I yanked the lid up.

“Is that a dildo?” he asked with a parted mouth.

“A what?” I frowned at him before turning back to my finds.

He grabbed the pink phallus I’d found just before my first ascent to the surface and waved it at me. “This is a dildo.”

“Is that a weapon?” Wily asked.

Ethan laughed, and I jolted at the sound. “Ah, no. Definitely not a weapon.” He smirked at me. “When we get out of this, Boy, I’ll show you what we use dildos for.”

I shivered at the intense stare he gave me. I still didn’t know what a *dildo* was, but considering that it was shaped like a cock and with the look he was giving me, I was excited to find out its use.

“Shit, that’s a speargun.” Ethan shot forward and grabbed one of my possessions out of the chest, holding it up. He played with it, and all I could do was watch until he made a sound of triumph. “You want a weapon, this will do.”

“It’s like a gun?” I cocked my head.

“Kind of. You shoot fish with it.” He checked it over, and I watched him until he nodded. “It’s got everything here too. It’s probably the best we’re going to get.”

Shouting made me jerk my head, and I placed a finger over my lips to signal everyone to be quiet. Ethan pulled at something on the gun, and all I could do was watch as he set up whatever he needed to. I couldn't look away at how he moved expertly with the weapon. I wanted to ask him how he knew about spearguns, but the answer seemed obvious. He was a hunter—a fisherman.

"Lyric, you can't run from me," my father shouted.

I stiffened and glanced at Ethan. The smirk he sent me gave me a confidence boost I didn't realize I'd needed until now. How had this human made me feel this way?

"Lyric, answer me! You are my child, and I will not let this human control you."

I snuck closer to the hole and peeked through it, not expecting my father to be *right there*. A fist landed in my eye, and I tumbled backward. There was shouting and noises around me, but stars danced in front of my eyes, so I didn't know what was happening until a few minutes later when my vision cleared.

Wily, Taya, and Pru were fighting with guards, kicking their tails and using them as weapons. One guard aimed a spear at Pru, and it narrowly missed him by inches. There was a roar, and my father thrust his tail in Ethan's direction. Before I could shout a warning, Ethan aimed the speargun at him, shooting. A bolt shot from the gun and straight at my father, piercing through his chest.

My father's yells of pain made everyone else stop and turn toward him, shock making their jaws fall open. Father's body convulsed and he gasped, letting out a gurgle. The spear had hit him right in the heart.

"Oh, fuck," Ethan mumbled. The spear still had some kind of black stringy looking rope attached, but it wasn't made from the same material. I didn't know what the string was for sure, but it made sense why it was there. If the gun was used for fish, that's what humans used to pull their prey to them.

"Your highness?" One of the guards, a man with wide shoulders and long black hair, swam closer.

Father gasped again and blood drifted from his mouth as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. The spear was still firmly planted in his chest, but it was too late. It didn't matter what they did, my father was going to die.

Wily spun to us. "You need to leave. Now."

“What about you?” I asked, fear becoming a knot inside my chest as I thought about what would happen to my brothers and Taya for being a part of the king’s murder.

“I’m the Crown Prince,” Wily said, but he didn’t look happy about it because he winced, as though the thought made him sick. “Go while you can.”

The guards glanced around at each other, and I supposed it made sense. Wily would be king now that my father was in his last moments of life. Technically, Wily hadn’t killed him. Ethan had.

“Now!” Wily’s face turned monstrous, and it was a new look on him. I didn’t like it, but I knew it was for my wellbeing.

Grabbing Ethan’s hand, I tugged him, and we kicked out legs to begin swimming up. Something hit our feet, and I felt the familiar swirling of magic breathing a different feeling inside us. When we reached the surface, we’d be fully human again, unable to breathe and speak underwater. I wished I could thank my brothers and Taya, but Wily was right. We needed to go. If the guards chose to, they could drag us back again for father’s murder. Though, technically, he wasn’t dead yet; he would be by the time we got back to the boat.

The swim to the surface felt like it took forever, and the longer that time went on, the harder it began to be to breathe. When finally we broke thorough the water, my chest hurt as much as my legs did. I shivered as I inhaled fresh air. Ethan’s breaths were deep, and he panted in exhaustion from where he floated beside me.

“Come on,” he said, pointing at the boat that wasn’t far away. I could barely move, however, and it was a struggle to shift my arms. Ethan must have seen my fight with my own body because he hooked his arm around me, and together we swam toward the boat that rocked with the waves. It felt too far away, but it didn’t take as long as I thought it would to get there. He grabbed me around the waist and helped me climb the ladder, and when I reached the deck, I collapsed on it.

Ethan wasn’t far behind me, and he fell onto his knees, his hands resting on his thighs as his chest rose and fell quickly. “Fuck. Never doing that again.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, sitting up and touching his face, neck, and chest, searching for injuries I couldn’t see.

“Your magic friend fixed me, remember?” He quirked a smile and then stopped, reaching up to press his fingers to his face. “Well, almost fixed me. I need to check the mirror.”

He was up before I could stop him, and I watched him limp toward the stairs that led down to the cabin. I didn’t have the energy to follow him. My body hurt too much. My gaze traveled to Zolo and Aza’s bodies, still dead where we’d left them. Their lifeless eyes stared back, and I waited for the guilt, but nothing came. If anything, it was anger swirling deep inside me, and the urge to go back down to Atlantia and destroy it. Father might have been dying when we left, but he wasn’t the only one who had a role in this.

Wind whooshed across the deck, and I trembled as the coldness of my wet clothes reminded me I was above water again. Pushing myself to my feet, I stumbled down the stairs and toward the bathroom.

Ethan was already there, sitting against the wall of the shower stall with water hot enough to create steam bashing down on his naked body. I rid myself of my clothes and joined him, happy that the shower was big enough that I could sit beside him. Leaning my head on his shoulder, I sighed.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you who I was. After you told me about your hunt for mermen, I was scared. I didn’t want you to hate me because I wanted you to like me.”

Ethan chuckled. “Yeah, I wouldn’t have liked you very much if I knew who you were.” He curled his arm around me, and dragged me closer.

The hot cascading stream felt good on my sore limbs, and I exhaled in relief.

“So does that mean you get to keep your voice then?”

“I don’t know…. Taya didn’t say, did he?” I hoped I did, though. While I’d enjoyed what Ethan and I had before, I loved it even more now that I could talk to him.

We sat there in silence for a long time. I didn’t know how many human minutes passed before he finally spoke again.

“Why did you give it all up? You were a prince, right?”

I closed my eyes and buried my face into his neck. “Yes, but I never wanted to be. I was an outcast like you. They all thought I was strange because of my interest in humans. The mermen we killed a few months back and today? They were my tormenters. They physically and verbally hurt me. I hated it there, and I’ve always wanted to be a human.”

“And then you saw me?” He kissed my temple and it was surprisingly gentle. I’d partially expected him to hate me, to hurt me for lying to him.

“It’s a little more complicated than that.” I tilted my head and let the spray of water hit my face. The scorching heat felt amazing on my skin, and I wanted to stay in here all afternoon, but we’d need to move soon and get rid of Zolo and Aza’s bodies. “When a merman or mermaid turns twenty-five, they’re allowed to go to the surface for the first time. I longed for that day, and it finally came. Father was worried about my obsession and didn’t want to allow me to go up. Grandfather convinced him to let me. So I did, and I saw your crew struggling against the storm. Your boat overturned, and all I could think about was getting to you. If I could have saved your father, I would have, but I could only take one of you.”

“And you chose me.”

I opened my eyes and glanced at him. “Yes.”

He shook his head and wrapped his fingers around my neck, squeezing. I gasped as his hand tightened on my windpipe, and I thought maybe he would kill me after all, but then he relaxed his grip again.

“I should want to hurt you,” he whispered, so quietly that it was almost hard to hear him over the spray of the shower. “But I don’t.”

“We don’t have to end what we’re doing,” I said, leaning my forehead against his. “We could take Zolo and Aza’s bodies back and prove you aren’t crazy. Then we could go back to Atlantia and destroy it.”

“At what cost? Fuck.” He released me and shoved himself to his feet, dragging me up with him. My legs felt like jelly, and I nearly collapsed again, but his hold on me was tight enough that he kept me upright. He turned off the shower and we stepped out. He threw a towel at me and grabbed one for himself, drying off his body as he stalked toward the bedroom. I followed him, unable to do much else.

The way he dried himself off told me he *was* mad, but probably not mad enough to kill me. I would have let him if he wanted to. Maybe I deserved it because I’d seen Father kill a human and never thought anything about it. Was I as bad as them?

“My father obsessed over finding mermaids,” he said as he dropped the towel on the floor and turned to sit on the bed.

My gaze roamed his naked form, and I took a moment to appreciate his soft cock sitting between his legs. His skin was red from the shower, but

even with the scars marring his face, he was the most handsome person I'd ever seen.

"Even before my mother died, he was sure they existed. He left my mother for months at a time, searching for this myth. I thought he was crazy, too." Ethan laughed and dropped his face into his hands. "After my mom drowned, I blamed Dad for a long time. Hated him for it. He started dragging me out on trips with him when I finished high school. I could have chosen not to go, but I wanted to so I could *laugh* at him whenever he didn't find something. I dreamed of a day when I could tell him he was wrong and have him believe me." He dropped his arms to his thighs and curled his hands into fists.

I moved over to the bed and sat beside him, bumping my shoulder against his encouragingly.

"That day the accident happened, I was just hoping he would fail again. That was going to be my last trip. I told him that if we didn't find anything this time, I was done. It would prove he was wrong. The end. He was adamant that we were going to find something. Then the storm hit and…. Well, you know what happened next." He glanced at me with a frown. "When you saved my life, you proved to me that Dad was right. You existed, and I hated myself for thinking he was crazy. So I started searching on my own."

"And you found us," I whispered, reaching out to link my fingers with his.

He shook his head. "Again, at what cost? The town thinks I'm crazy, and when I brought them back proof, they still called me crazy. Maybe I should have let them have the tail."

"We've got more proof now. Zolo and Aza. We can take them back."

"No." Ethan clenched his jaw. "You know what I learned down there in that little mermaid city of yours? They're not worth it." He turned himself toward me and cupped my face. "They're not fucking worth a cent. No matter what we do, Boy, it'll never be good enough for those reporters, and we shouldn't be living for those bastards."

"You're right," I murmured with a smile. "So what do we do now?"

"I don't know…." He stroked his thumb across my chin and then over my lips. "Maybe we should leave that shitty town behind. Go somewhere else."

“I’ve never been anywhere else.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “But I’d follow you anywhere.”

“We’d need to get you some kind of fake ID and birth certificate and shit. Make it legit. Maybe you could go by Lyric since that’s your name.”

I pouted. “I hate that name.”

“Can you think of anything better?” He smirked.

“Hm.” I shifted onto his lap, my knees on either side of his thighs. “I can keep my first name, as long as I can have your last, Mr. Turmont.”

He laughed, and I shivered as the sound worked its way down my spine. Pleasure curled hot in my gut. “You drive a hard bargain, but I agree to your terms. How about we get rid of those bodies, throw them in the fucking ocean where those pricks belong, and go home, pack our shit, and get out of dodge?”

I sighed in delight. “In human words, fuck yes.”

His laughter grew louder.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ethan

We ended in a small town south of Miami. The weather was slightly warmer than I was used to, but I liked it because no one knew who we were. Strangers, that's what we were to everyone in this shitbucket we called our new home. We still had the boat sitting in a wharf that we took out for regular trips, and I still lived the nonworking life thanks to Dad's inheritance, but now that I wasn't on a mission to find and destroy merpeople, I'd thought I'd be restlessly bored. That wasn't possible with Boy around, though. He made every day more exciting than the last.

Boy stretched out where he lay on the deck of the boat and grinned up at me when my shadow blocked his sunlight. He cocked his head and moaned.

"Hello, love of my life."

I rolled my eyes. "Cheesy motherfucker."

Boy—not Lyric, he was only Lyric on paper—cackled. He sat up and stared at the bag in my hand. "What have you got for me?"

I smirked and kneeled beside him, making sure to rest my knee on the towel he sat on. The sun was scorching today, and the deck would burn me. Opening the bag, I pulled out the prize I went searching for.

He frowned and reached for it, but I snatched it back so he couldn't get it. "Is that—"

"I *did* tell you I was going to teach you what a dildo is used for."

"Oh really?" He bounced in excitement. "But that one is flesh colored?"

"Yep." I winked. "Because if it's going to be fake, it should at least *look* like a real cock. Now…." I ran my palm up one of his long legs and stared at the small blue Speedos he wore. "How about you go downstairs and put

on some heels and that red dress I love seeing on you, and we give the Fitzgeralds a show?”

Boy shook his head and glanced over his shoulder at the elderly couple in the boat next to ours. When he looked back to me, he waggled his eyebrows. “Your wish is my command. How about I put on those nice fishnets, too?”

“You read my mind.” I captured his mouth against mine and kissed him hard, reveling in the little moans he gave me.

When I broke the kiss, I winked at the Fitzgeralds, who’d stopped what they were doing on their own deck to sneer at us.

Boy laughed again, and I helped him stand, slapping his ass on his way past. He saluted me and almost danced down the stairs.

I shook my head and sighed. The last thing I’d expected was to be *this* happy, but fuck, Boy knew how to turn me on in all the right ways. Leaving Loutu was the best thing we’d ever done. As much as I was tempted to find Atlantia again and destroy it, while also proving Dad was right, they really weren’t worth my time. I had what I wanted now.

Before we’d left, we did travel one more time out to the same long and lat where I thought Atlantia was. As though they knew we were coming, Wily and that sea witch met us out there.

“He’s dead,” Wily had said to Boy with a grim face. “And I’m king now.”

“Be better than Father was,” Boy told him.

Wily had nodded. “I promise.”

It didn’t matter what happened to Atlantia in the end. I had my boy and that’s the only thing I needed.

The sound of a throat clearing ripped me from my thoughts and I spun my gaze to the stairs, where Boy stood in a short pencil dress, heels, and the skanky fishnets I loved to see on him.

“Your little whore is ready to please,” Boy whispered.

“Fuck.” I nearly stumbled to my feet and grabbed the paper bag with the dildo. While I dragged him back down the stairs and toward the bedroom, Boy’s laughter made my heart skip a beat.

Yep, it would all be okay.

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